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Johnston: Legislature should pass critical broadband bill

By Barbara Johnston posted on September 6, 2013 in Legislation, News

Health care reform is here, and with it comes the promise of delivering quality, affordable health insurance to millions of Californians. But imagine if you don't have the ability to go online to compare and shop for the right insurance policy. Or what if you live in a rural community that lacks access to medical specialists?

For too many Californians with limited or no access to high-speed Internet, this is a reality, leaving residents and communities without the tools to fully benefit from the Affordable Care Act and advances in telehealth.

SB 740, awaiting approval by the state Legislature, will help bridge this health care Digital Divide by supporting broadband deployment in rural areas to expand telehealth opportunities. AB 1299 will benefit the state's public housing residents by helping them obtain affordable broadband at home, and provide training on how to access treatment and insurance information, including coverage subsidies through Covered California, the state's health benefit exchange.

In places where geography and lack of specialists make it difficult to access care, we already are seeing effective models that use secure high definition videoconferencing to connect mental health professionals and patients, for example. But a secure, high-speed connection is required. Telemedicine can be a boon to disabled and senior communities, where regular checkups are critical but often hard to make happen. But these populations are among the least connected, as are those eligible for federal health insurance subsidies under the Affordable Care Act.

As Covered California launches Oct. 1, there is growing concern about how to reach the millions of Californians who are eligible for coverage. As of 2014, about 2.6 million Californians will qualify for federal financial assistance. Recently, the White House cited limited digital literacy among underserved and minority populations as a barrier to widespread adoption of electronic health information technology, a necessity to build an efficient healthcare delivery system.

SB 740 and AB 1299 come at a time when public sentiment is growing to get all Californians connected online. A recent Public Policy Institute of California survey found that two in three Californians think broadband Internet should be viewed as a public utility rather than a luxury and would favor a government program funded by telecommunications providers to increase access for lower-income and rural residents through subsidies.

Health care reforms coupled with vibrant online technology are poised to create a healthier California, saving lives and money. I encourage passage of SB 740 and AB 1299, two measures that will return big dividends in the effort to get all residents online and improve the quality of life for all Californians.

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About Barbara Johnston

Barbara Johnston helped set up the California Telemedicine Network and served as CEO of the Medical Board of California. She is Chief Executive and Co-Founder of HealthLinkNow. She serves on the board of the California Emerging Technology Fund.

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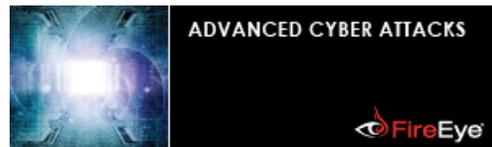
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