

Aid urged for inmates, uninsured

Congregations meet to present demands to Richmond leaders

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Representatives from 20 Richmond-area congregations packed Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church last night to seek commitments to help substance abusers in the Richmond jail get treatment and provide more uninsured adults with primary health care.

A crowd of 900 -- diverse in age, race and faith -- heard Sheriff C.T. Woody Jr. say "Yes, I do" to demands made by Richmonders Involved to Strengthen Our Communities (RISC) during its 90-minute annual action meeting.

But the commitments sought from Dr. Sheldon M. Retchin, chief executive officer of VCU Health System, remain unresolved, as he did not attend despite several invitations, said the Rev. Tyrone E. Nelson, pastor of Sixth Mount Zion and president of RISC.

VCU spokeswoman Pamela Lepley said Retchin, who has met with the group, could not attend because of a prior commitment.

RISC, made up of 15 congregations, selected substance-abuse treatment and health care as the two crucial issues to pursue this year as part of its justice ministry.

"We're here to speak for those who can't speak for themselves and to challenge the powers to be to use their powers wisely," Nelson said.

Woody was asked to commit to several actions:

- Create a task force to plan for a new intensive substance abuse treatment program in jail that includes evidence-based treatment methods, tracking and plans for follow-up care.
- Develop a pilot for 60 inmates to be used as a basis for a comprehensive program.
- Implement the plan by June 1, 2009.
- Review plans for the creation of the task force with RICS in 30 days.
- Direct staff to meet with RISC to review progress toward the goals.

"The most powerful word in community is unity," Woody said. "You and I can make a difference," he told the applauding crowd.

There wasn't any victorious applause for the health-care issue. Lepley said Dr. Michelle Whitehurst-Cook of VCU School of Medicine, an expert in health disparities, would attend, but she did not speak.

"The people who come before our group are decision-makers; we don't take surrogates" who can't be "held accountable for what we were asking," Nelson said after the meeting.

An estimated 131,000 adults in the greater Richmond area are uninsured, including 57,000 low-income residents. VCU Health System receives \$104 million for indigent care but about only 11,000 people receive primary care as a result of these funds, according RISC's research, which Lepley confirmed.

RISC wants VCU Health System to "deliver more primary care to those who desperately need it," said the Rev. Ralph Hodge, pastor of Second Baptist Church Southside and RISC vice president.

RISC had planned to ask Retchin publicly if he would commit to the following:

- Maximize state and federal dollars by increasing the focus on primary care for the low-income uninsured so that 15,000 additional primary care visits are done by June 1, 2009.
- Create a survey of customer experiences with regard to financial screening in the indigent care program and act on those results.
- Work with RISC and other stakeholders to develop policies to provide primary care for the low-income uninsured in the community.

After the meeting, Nelson said that a lot was accomplished.

"We feel good about what's going to happen at the city jail. We feel real positive about that. With the health care for the uninsured, we will keep on grinding away," Nelson said.

"We got the ball rolling and VCU knows there is a group out here pushing for them to provide more primary care, and we won't rest until it happens."