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State postpones restructuring of cancer screening program for low-income women

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Following a push by women's health advocates and breast cancer awareness groups, state officials have delayed the proposed restructuring of a health screening program for low-income women.

In [a memo released Friday](#), state public health administrator Karen McKeown said the restructuring of the Well Woman Program, previously set for June 30 of this year, will now be finalized on June 30, 2015. The program offers free breast and cervical cancer screenings, as well as multiple sclerosis tests to low-income women.

Supporters of the program say they are glad of the surprise decision to delay the overall restructuring but remain wary because the memo doesn't say how many providers and coordinators could still be cut.

The memo, sent to local health officers, health providers and local coordinators, thanks the "partners in the WWWP provider and coordinator community who have reached out to us with concerns and suggestions regarding the proposed restructure of WWWP. The department has modified the original plans and timeline in light of this feedback."

Sara Finger, executive director of the Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health, said she remains concerned about continuity of care for women in the program, and the degree of transparency in changes afoot for the Wisconsin Well Woman Program.

"All of us who have been weighing in on this issue will continue to pull together questions that remain unanswered, and we want to make sure the provider contracts are renewed right away, we want to make sure there is a robust data collection process and we want to make sure there's a transparent input process put in place," Finger said. "This is definitely a step in the right direction, but we're not quite celebrating yet, and we want to make sure this added time is used very strategically to make the women in this program don't fall through the cracks at any point."

In December, the DHS told providers and coordinators that as of June 30, the number of providers would be reduced from 1,000 to a handful, and that the 83 coordinating agencies -- one for each of Wisconsin's 72 counties and 11 Indian tribes -- would be reduced to between five and 10 coordinators for the entire state. During a women's health care summit earlier this month, breast cancer awareness and women's health groups' discussed an [effort to slow down the changes](#).

Dawn Anderson, executive director of the Wisconsin Breast Cancer Coalition, said she was pleased with Friday's announcement.

"We're very happy that they've decided to listen to the stakeholders, especially the ones in the field -- the coordinators and providers," she said. "It just made no sense to any of us to rush this through without knowing better how many -- and where -- women would continue to need services."

But Anderson called for those involved in the program to be "kept in the loop as data is collected and the service coordination model refined."

"I hope that the department will not make decisions from an office without consulting the folks in the field," she said.

The memo is vague about numbers of providers to be retained, stating only, "We will issue an RFA to select providers who will form the new provider network."

The memo also indicates that the program will still move to a regional, rather than a local, coordinator system, but promises: "Regional coordinators will provide the same services currently offered by local coordinators."

Finger said that could be difficult:

"It's not about them losing their jobs, it's about continuity of care for the women they're serving," Finger said. "They know how much is on their plates right now with 72 coordinators."

*-- By Kay Nolan
For WisPolitics.com*