



UNITED STATES of CARE

MAINE VOICES:

EXPERIENCES WITH HEALTH CARE
From **AUBURN & LEWISTON**

Maine has made substantial progress in increasing health care coverage for residents in recent years by expanding Medicaid, establishing a state-based Marketplace, and broadening eligibility for children. While these efforts have significantly increased health insurance coverage, Maine people, including those with insurance, continue to struggle with the high and rising cost of health care.

USofCare believes that sustainable improvement within the health care system starts by listening to people and including them in every step of the process. To better understand Mainers' experiences with health care we hosted a community listening session in Auburn and learned how health care access and affordability is shaping the lives of residents in Maine's twin cities.

Key Findings

In the fall of 2024, a conversation was held with 21 members of the Lewiston-Auburn community with ages ranging from 21 to 75, and included a mix of people from different political affiliations, incomes, and identities. The 90 minute conversation covered a variety of health system topics which revealed a deeply concerning picture of the U.S. health care system, marked by significant challenges in affordability, accessibility, and quality of care. Further insights on these key findings include:

Affordability and Accessibility. High costs were a major concern, with participants citing exorbitant insurance premiums, deductibles, co-pays, and prescription drug prices. Limited access to care was another pressing issue, stemming from long wait times, provider shortages, and insurance coverage limitations. Many participants described the financial burden of health care, leading to delayed or avoided care and multiple participants allowed their health care bills to be "sent to collections" since they were unable to pay.

Quality of Care and Provider Experiences. Participants shared inconsistent experiences with health care providers, ranging from compassionate and helpful to dismissive and unhelpful. Poor communication and a lack of empathy were common complaints, while long wait times and limited access to specialists were cited as significant challenges.

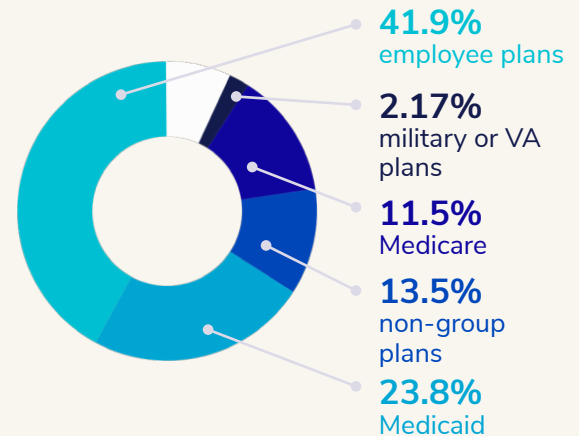
"There's also just been other times where I had an emergency surgery, and it was really expensive, and I just let it go to collections."

-Lewiston area community member

RECENT SURVEYS OF MAINE RESIDENTS FOUND THAT:

- Half of surveyed voters are worried about their ability to afford basic health care needs.
- Two out of three voters are worried about their ability to afford out-of-pocket costs they may be charged for hospital-based medical care.
- Half of surveyed voters found it difficult to save for emergencies and important life events because of health care costs.
- About half of surveyed Maine voters have had trouble accessing primary care.

POPULATION OF LEWISTON, ME HEALTH COVERAGE



Primary care physicians in Androscoggin County, ME are seeing more patients on average with a single physician seeing **1248 patients per year** up from **1777 the previous year**.

19 out of 22 participants have delayed or avoided getting the health care they needed due to cost.

Systemic Issues and Inequities. Insurance companies were criticized for complex policies, high costs, and limited coverage. Pharmaceutical companies were blamed for high drug prices and a lack of transparency. The overall health care system was seen as flawed, with significant issues related to access, affordability, and quality of care. Social and cultural factors, such as socioeconomic status, education, and geographic location, were also identified as significant contributors to health disparities. Racial and ethnic disparities in both access to care and care quality were also discussed.

Mental Health and Primary Care. Participants expressed significant concerns about the lack of access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas. Stigma associated with mental health conditions was also identified as a barrier to seeking help. Limited availability of inpatient mental health facilities and insurance limitations significantly hindered access to care. For example, there are long waitlists to see a primary care provider (PCP) or a mental health provider - some sign up but eventually give up because the wait time for an appointment is months too long. One participant shared that she had to wait nine months to see her primary care provider.

Health Care Workforce Challenges. The shortage of health care providers, particularly in rural areas and for specialized services, was of deep concern. High rates of burnout and turnover among health care providers were identified as contributing to access issues and the increasing administrative burden on providers was also seen as a significant challenge.

“Just because we have a primary care doctor doesn’t mean we have access to health care or the things that we need, especially around trauma or if we’ve experienced violence or things like high blood pressure and stuff.”

-Lewiston area community member

— Policy Considerations

Mainers in the twin city area struggle to find providers they can trust at prices they can afford leaving many with medical debt that keeps them working long hours, unable to pay for basic necessities, or skipping or delaying necessary care. Even those with insurance frequently struggle to afford prescription medication, premiums, and copayments. Policymakers should prioritize policies that drive health care costs down by rationalizing reimbursement costs at health systems that far exceed the national average. Policymakers can also invest in a culturally competent workforce of community providers to address growing problems in accessing primary care and behavioral health care throughout the region.

— Conclusion

Twin cities Mainers are tired of making hard choices when it comes to their health care and are looking to policymakers on both sides of the aisle to prioritize investing in the health and well-being of their communities to ensure a thriving Maine well into the future.

Maine spends more on health care as a share of the state’s GSP than that of the U.S. and New England average.