

'Dr. Hotspot' coming to Allentown

The health reformer is to speak at Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ on Monday.



Dr Jeffrey Brenner, also known as "Dr. Hotspot," will be giving a talk in Allentown Monday night. (Special To The Morning Call / September 25, 2011)

By Tim Darragh, Of The Morning Call

He's nicknamed "Dr. Hotspot" but Dr. Jeffrey Brenner, a nationally recognized leader in health reform, might be more appropriately known as "Dr. Reality Check."

Brenner has gained fame for his painstaking analysis of health care needs in Camden, N.J., one of the nation's poorest cities, and leading dramatic improvements in health and cost savings for his target group. But Brenner, who will meet with local health care and community leaders Monday in Allentown and speak at a public forum that night, says there are no shortcuts to reforming health care. It takes reams of data on individual communities, plenty of outside money to convince an entrenched health care industry and "boots on the ground," he says.

Indeed, even with his success, chronicled in *The New Yorker* magazine and on PBS, Brenner says reforming health care in a single community is a daunting task that must involve doctors, social service and community agencies and business. "It requires cross-sector collaborations that we don't even have the language for," he said in an interview last week. "We're all very much in our own worlds and our own silos."

Brenner's breakthrough idea, which was recently adopted into a three-year demonstration project in New Jersey, was to identify the sickest people and devote a personal team of medical and social service workers to address their needs, face-to-face and over the long haul. His initial research showed that in Camden, the sickest 1 percent of residents consumed around 30 percent of the health care spending. His work targeting those residents by address earned him the nickname "Dr. Hotspot."

By focusing care on the individuals who were frequently in the emergency room and treated for out-of-control chronic illness, his team was able to cut their hospital visits and costs by 40 percent to 50 percent. That might sound like a goal that would be unanimously supported, but Brenner said the health care system is set up in the opposite direction. "Right now, it's a terrible model for dealing with sick people," he said, adding that hospitals "get paid to fill beds."

Brenner, who's been working his project in Camden for 10 years, said the health industry, including insurers and government, were slow to embrace his ideas. He was able to get the three-year Medicaid program signed into law by Gov. Chris Christie last month only by structuring the program so that the state wouldn't have to contribute to it. Instead, the program will allow organizers to keep a portion of the Medicaid spending they save, he said. "The old days of give me money and I'll save you money are done," Brenner said.

While Allentown is no Camden, organizers said the Lehigh Valley's health care, community and faith leaders can learn from its example. The Rev. Bob Stevens, pastor of Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ in Allentown — where Brenner will speak — said the meeting will "help both the faith and health community think about what we can do together to improve our health system," possibly by following the Camden model.

Every day, clergy in the Valley encounter people who fit the population Brenner addressed: older people living alone who are suffering with dementia, mothers who use the emergency department as a primary care provider and families with no health coverage, said the Rev. Maritza Torres Dolich, outreach pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Allentown and a board member of Congregations United for Neighborhood Action, a co-sponsor of the visit.

The urgency of the task is great, Brenner said. He worries that the pace of rising health care costs and efforts to cut Medicaid could overwhelm even proven efforts at wringing real savings out of the system. "The bulk of the federal debt and the state debt," he said, "is health care, health care and health care."

Regardless, community leaders in the Valley should not wait for help from Harrisburg or Washington, and instead work now to reorient services to become patient-centered, he said. "Failure to do that is going to result in a lot of pain in the community," Brenner said. Rather than serve the health care industry, he said, the tables have to be turned so that the system serves the patients. "The magic pill," Brenner said, "is relationships."

Dr. Jeffrey Brenner's talk

- **What:** Congregations United for Neighborhood Action, the Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust and the Moravian Theological Seminary and College hosting a presentation by Dr. Jeffrey Brenner ("Dr. Hotspot")
- **Where:** Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ, 620 Hamilton St., Allentown
- **When:** Doors open at 6:30 p.m., presentation from 7-8 p.m. Monday

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