Moving on but not fading away

Parting thoughts from longtime legislator Tom Huntley

BY MELISSA MRACHEK

In 1992, when Rep. Tom Huntley (DFL-Duluth) was first elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, the Mall of America had just opened, Dennis Green was in his first season as the Vikings’ head coach and Arne Carlson was governor. Obviously, a lot has changed since Huntley first took a seat in the House chamber.

Now, he is just weeks away from retirement.

As he looks back on his 22 years at the Capitol, he can’t help but reflect on the work he has been involved in and the role he has played in shaping health care in Minnesota.

“Rep. Huntley brought a unique set of skills to the Minnesota Legislature,” says Dave Renner, the MMA’s director of state and federal legislation. “It’s hard to look back on any piece of health care legislation passed in the last 22 years that Tom Huntley was not directly involved in.”

Homing in on health care

Prior to his career at the Capitol, Huntley taught biochemistry at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. Perhaps it was that background or the fact that he was named to the Health and Human Services Committee when he arrived at the Capitol that cultivated his interest in health care legislation.

During his tenure at the Legislature, Huntley has played a role in the passage of some significant pieces of legislation. One of his greatest accomplishments, he says, was serving as chief author of the Freedom to Breathe Act, which banned smoking in public places when it went into effect in 2007. “It was somewhat controversial with only 65 percent support,” Huntley recalls. “Now 80 percent of people support what we did.”

That same year, Gov. Tim Pawlenty tapped Huntley to help spearhead health care reform in Minnesota. “He asked us to head up a committee aimed at getting more people insured, spending less money and improving health care,” Huntley says. One of the major outcomes of that work was the establishment of health care homes.

“The whole idea was to try to keep people healthier rather than waiting until they ended up in the hospital,” he says. “We set up the health care home system to coordinate care for people. And it has proved very successful.”

Just this year, the Minnesota Department of Health released results of a three-year study showing a 9 percent reduction in health-care related costs for Medicaid beneficiaries who used a clinic that has been designated by the state as a health care home. In addition, the study found health care home clinics outperformed other clinics on quality measures.

A number of Huntley’s ideas for health care reform that were included in 2008 legislation ended up as provisions in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). He says because Minnesota has been a leader on issues such as health care homes, accountable care organizations (ACOs), quality measures, implementing health care technology and a statewide health improvement initiative, the
feds looked to our state when crafting the ACA.

Once the ACA passed, Huntley championed many of its major initiatives in Minnesota. He served as chief author of the legislation that expanded Medicaid, known as Medical Assistance in Minnesota. As a result, thousands more Minnesotans have access to care.

Still work to be done
Health care reform is an ongoing effort. Huntley says the focus now needs to shift toward changing the way we pay for care. “We don’t pay for results,” he says. For that reason, he says, the current fee-for-service model must be eliminated. Minnesota is experimenting with new models in which providers receive bonuses if they show they have saved money and improved health outcomes.

“I think we are one of only eight states given money to set up accountable care organizations,” he says. “And it’s changing the way providers think about what they are doing.”

Measuring results is key to changing the payment structure. If there is one piece of advice Huntley would give physicians, it’s to measure results and not be afraid to share them. “It’s a lot of work, but you have to know your results.” He adds that physicians need to be talking with one another. “I’m a big believer that all the important things happen in the world because of who you bumped into in the hallway,” he says. “Talking to other physicians and educating each other is the most important way to improve.”

The next chapter
Even though 2014 will be his last session as a lawmaker, Huntley plans to remain involved in health care issues. In particular, he is interested in helping solve one of MMA’s top priorities—alleviating the impending primary care physician shortage in the state. “The whole emphasis on health care reform is to emphasize primary care so people don’t have to go to the hospital or see a specialist,” he says, adding that reform won’t work if there aren’t enough primary care physicians.

Aside from his work on health care legislation, Huntley says he’ll miss the people: “I have some very good friends here,” he says of both lawmakers and the lobbyists who have helped him understand complex issues.

However, he won’t miss the pace. “What I won’t miss is 10 hours of debate on the House floor when nobody’s mind is being changed whatsoever. We have 134 House members. We often say ‘Everything’s been said, but not everybody has said it.’”

Nor will he miss the partisanship. “Minnesota used to have a tradition of working between the two parties,” he says. “People used to be able to argue an issue and then go out and have a beer together. That doesn’t seem to happen much anymore.”

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Huntley has been advocating for health care legislation for most of his 22-year career at the Capitol.