

New Yorkers Say it is Time for Universal Health Care

(Glens Falls, Sept. 5) A statewide coalition of consumers, faith groups and medical professionals called today for the state of New York to take action to provide quality, affordable health care for all.

Many of the groups were testifying at the first of five state public hearings on developing a universal health care proposal for New York State. The state early next year will conduct a series of studies on various approaches to providing health care to all New Yorkers. Governor Spitzer is expected to make a recommendation on universal health care in May 2008.

Many of the groups back a statement of universal health care principles developed by the NY Universal Health Care Options Campaign. The groups want to ensure that every New Yorker has the right to receive quality health care while the state takes steps to control costs for consumers, taxpayers and employers. They are concerned that high copays or deductibles, or mandates for individuals to purchase health care insurance (e.g., the Massachusetts model) will still prevent many New Yorkers from accessing health care services.

"We need our elected officials to put the interests of patients and consumers first. The other industrial countries spend far less money than we do yet they have better health outcomes and everyone is covered," noted Mark Dunlea of the Hunger Action Network.

Public opinion polls have consistently shown strong public support for a universal health care system. For instance, a March 2007 poll by CBS/ NY Times found that 64 percent of the respondents said the government should guarantee health insurance for all; 27 percent said it should not. An overwhelming majority in the poll said the health care system needed fundamental change or total reorganization.

"Our bottom line is patient medical and financial safety. Those can only be achieved by a non-profit system viewing healthcare as a social good. The time has come for us to ask what kind of a people we are. Do we care for all our people or do we care for private insurance company profits? It's that simple. We need radical reform of our thinking supporting bold action by our government to redirect our failing healthcare system," said Richard Propp, MD, Chair, Capital District Alliance for Universal Healthcare.

The American Cancer Society, one of the groups participating in the press conference, recently announced that it plans to devote its entire \$15 million advertising budget this year not to smoking or colorectal screening but to the problems of inadequate health coverage. The group cited its frustration that cancer rates are not dropping as rapidly as hoped. A recent study by ACS found that People without health insurance and those on Medicaid are more likely to be diagnosed with advanced stages of cancer than those with private health insurance. The co-author of the study, Michael Halpern, MD, PhD, has previously stated that "being uninsured or underinsured having a significant effect on advanced disease...Even when you have insurance, there's going to be tremendous variety in terms of deductibles, co-payments, and access to care, so even having insurance isn't a guarantee of access to timely and adequate care."

"If New York is to move toward universal coverage in ways that will be sustainable over time, the State cannot simply plan on dealing with those who are currently uninsured and underinsured," said Sid Socolar, co-convenor of Rekindling Reform, a NYC-based coalition of more than 70 groups. "It must recognize and address (1) the ongoing erosion of job-based coverage and (2) the continuing rise in the costs of coverage and care in all parts of the health care system. New York will need to take great care with controlling health care costs and defining affordable coverage, or else 'expanded coverage' can become a cloak for expanded under-insurance."

Many of the groups are concerned about the role of private health insurance, and the significant administrative costs and bureaucracy it imposes on the health care system.

"Health care costs will never be controlled as long as private insurance companies are allowed to use the dollars we pay in premiums to fund their efforts to compete for market share and to devise strategies to increase profits by reducing claims paid out. A single-payer system of publicly financed, privately-delivered health care is the only way to control cost in a meaningful, sustainable way," said Colleen M. Florio, PhD, Chair, Warren County League of Women Voters.

While the coalition looks forward to see how the state's funded studies evaluate the different approaches to

universal health care, many individual groups presently prefer a single-payer model such as Medicare for All.

“The Capital District chapter of Physicians For A National Health Program (PNHP) welcomes this public hearing process as an important first step along the road toward achieving decent, affordable and comprehensive health care for every person residing in New York State,” said Paul Winkeller, the Executive Director of the local chapter. PNHP, which represents over 14,000 physicians nationally and more than 1,000 in the Empire State, strongly supports a single payer Medicare for all type system.

“This approach, in varying forms, is now in place in every other major highly industrialized western nation. Because the profit incentive that dominates the largely private multi-payer system in the United States has been stripped out, these countries pay far less per capita for comprehensive care for every one of their citizens, and because of these savings and efficiencies key industries in many of these nations have a distinct advantage in the highly competitive global marketplace,” said Winkeller.

“If any state in the nation can win a single payer guaranteed healthcare plan for all, it is New York. New Yorkers have led many reforms and important changes in the nation throughout U.S. history. Now is the time for us to take leadership on the changes needed in our healthcare system,” said Marilyn Clement, National Coordinator, Healthcare-NOW. Added Rebecca Elgie of the Tompkins County Health Care Task Force, “we need to stay focused on Single-payer financing and ending For-profit health care, this is not the time for compromise.”

A local business owner commented, “New York businesses and our workers are forced to subsidize the health care costs of corporate welfare recipients like WalMart. In the meantime, because we don't pay our workers starvation wages, they are considered 'too wealthy' to receive these state-run benefits. A single-payer system will level the playing field for all New Yorkers and provide a real answer to the most serious issue facing business today,” said Matt Funicello of Rock Hill Bakehouse, Inc.