

Single-Payer Activists Descend on Salem to Keep Grassroots Movement Alive

Sen. Michael Dembrow, the movement's leader in the state Legislature, has reintroduced legislation to implement single-payer in Oregon. Broader support exists for a bill to provide state money to figure out how universal healthcare might work and be paid for in Oregon.

Chris Gray



Labor unions and religious organizations joined Health Care for All Oregon to shut down Court Street in front of the Oregon State Capitol on Wednesday, for what's become a biennial rally in support of a state single-payer health insurance program to replace the patchwork system currently in use in Oregon.

"Healthcare is a human right! We shouldn't have to beg for it," said Fernando Gapasin, the state chairman of the United Auto Workers and National Writers Union. He said collective bargaining could be much more productive if workers and employers no longer had to haggle over whether employees could receive quality health insurance.

Single-payer activists have kept up their grassroots efforts, despite the national health reform law that reduced the number of uninsured people in Oregon to 5 percent of the population, a group largely composed of immigrants ineligible for the benefits of Obamacare.

"Basically the Affordable Care Act was a necessary step to get more people covered by healthcare in America, and get rid of practices like excluding people due to pre-existing health conditions," said Lee Mercer, the president of Health Care for All Oregon and a leader of the Main Street Alliance, a liberal small-business group. "Until we get to a universal healthcare system, we will have a Swiss cheese system of coverage, high copayments and deductibles."

The organizers picked a good day for the rally of several hundred people. It was overcast but dry, as the temperatures hit 59 degrees, a mild day for mid-February in Oregon. Their legislative champions, including Portland Democrats Sen. Michael Dembrow, Rep. Barbara Smith Warner and Rep. Jennifer Williamson, spoke at the rally and told them that two bills that aimed to help their cause -- House Bill 2828 and Senate Bill 631 -- will have hearings at the Capitol this year.

HB 2828 extends the deadline for a state universal healthcare financing study, and spends state money to pay for the study, which had been ordered by the Legislature in 2013 but has gone unfunded and unable to attract the private investment anticipated.

"I will work to get our healthcare study passed and funded this session," Williamson told the crowd. She serves on the Committee on Ways & Means, which will appropriate the funds.

Dembrow told The Lund Report that the dollar amount HB 2828 supporters expect to ask for will be close to the \$100,000 suggested in January by Dr. Sam Metz, who has been in charge of raising private funds. "We've been able to raise or get commitments for about one-fourth of what we need," he said. "I do like the model of a shared responsibility."

The other bill, SB 631, is expected to be heard in March in the Senate Health Committee by Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson, D-Gresham, a first for an Oregon state single-payer bill, which previously had been given air time only in the House Health Committee, chaired by the more liberal Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland. The bill has little chance of proceeding past a public hearing.

Still, Dembrow was able to attract 27 sponsors this year for SB 631, including three returning Democrats who had not previously supported single-payer -- Sen. Floyd Prozanski of Eugene; Rep. John Lively of Springfield and Rep. Margaret Doherty of Tigard.

Dembrow reminded the crowd that passage of a measure like SB 631 will not be something that comes out of the debates of the Oregon Legislature but the work of the grassroots activists: “The battle for single-payer in this state, the battle for universal healthcare in this state, is not going to happen in this building,” he said. “Single-payer is going to come because of your organizing throughout this state.”

“We’re not here for ourselves because we have Medicare,” said Corvallis activist Carol Gold to The Lund Report, pointing out her gray hair. “We’re here for our children and grandchildren.”

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