

1,000 rally for single-payer health care at Oregon capitol

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SALEM — Advocates for single-payer health care in Oregon made their voices heard in Salem Feb. 4 — the opening day of the 77th legislative session. Among the nearly 1,000 people gathered at the noontime rally on the front steps of the State Capitol was State Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland). A member of the American Federation of Teachers, Dembrow is co-chief sponsor of the Health Care for All Oregon Act, which would set up a comprehensive taxpayer-supported health care system. The draft legislation currently has 24 sponsors, including rookie state Rep. Jennifer Williamson (D-Portland), who is co-chief sponsor.

State Senator Chip Shields (D-Portland) is co-chief sponsor on the Senate side.

A second bill in draft form carried by Dembrow would authorize a formal study of the health care financing system.

“Every Oregonian has a fundamental right to health care. The Affordable Care Act and public exchanges are not the answer,” Dembrow said.

Williamson told rallygoers that each year 540 Oregonians die from treatable diseases because they could not access affordable health care. In addition, 34,000 Oregonians and 12,000 families were forced into personal bankruptcies last year, caused by a medical crises. “And most had insurance when their medical condition began. That is outrageous,” she said.

Dembrow said that due to language in the federal Affordable Care Act, a state single-payer system cannot be established before 2017. Vermont passed a law in 2011 that would establish a single-payer health care system by 2017, using the federal health care overhaul as a springboard. Dembrow vowed to spend the next three years building a movement to support a “health care for all” system in Oregon.

“It won’t be solved by lawmakers or by the governor,” Dembrow said. “It’s going to be solved by a million people in the state of Oregon demanding change, organizing for change, and voting for change.”

Dembrow said his goal is to have a ballot measure ready for the 2016 election.

“Getting the system that we want and need will ultimately require a vote of the people,” he said. “To win an election like this will require 900,000 to 1 million votes. There will be opposition. We need to organize, starting now.”

Ten buses delivered people from as far away as La Grande and Bandon, Ashland and Prineville for the lunchtime rally, organized by Health Care for All Oregon.