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Advocates press case for single-payer health plan

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Concept resurfaces for third time in recent Oregon sessions.

State Sen. Michael Dembrow and a few hundred people have not given up on a single-payer system under which the government pays for all health care.

The Portland Democrat, for the third consecutive cycle, has introduced a bill to institute such a system in Oregon. No state has done so; Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin abandoned his attempt when he could not come up with a way to pay for it.

But Dembrow, at a rally Wednesday at the Capitol in Salem, says he will persevere.

“Thank you for sticking with this for so many years,” he says.

“We have so much work to be done, and it’s going to be done in our neighborhoods, churches and organizations, one on one. We have to explain to people that we are talking about a simple system here, so that people do not fall through the cracks and are not denied coverage.”

Dembrow’s two previous proposals got a hearing by the House Health Care Committee, but advanced no further. His current Senate Bill 631, he says, is headed for a hearing by the Senate Health Care Committee in March.

He did get a bill requesting a study by the Oregon Health Authority about how health care should best be funded. The study was not funded, although some aspects were carried out; House Bill 2828, which is up for a hearing Monday, would extend the deadline two years.

Under the federal Affordable Care Act passed in 2010, and implemented starting last year, the share of Oregonians with coverage has increased to 95 percent through a combination of private insurance and expanded state-supported care.

But advocates of a single-payer system argue that still leaves thousands of Oregonians without any coverage, and many more with large deductibles and copayments for medications and services.

“We should give people the freedom to choose their medical providers and to get health care when they need it without the intervention of big for-profit insurance companies,” says Lee Mercer of Silverton, board president of Health Care for All Oregon, the rally’s sponsor. Mercer is a former small-business owner and former executive director of the Main Street Alliance of Oregon.

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PHOTO: PETER WONG -
State Sen. Michael
Dembrow speaks at
Wednesday's health care
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