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Health reform advocates plan Medicare birthday party Saturday

[BENNETT HALL Corvallis Gazette-Times](#)

Medicare, the federal health insurance program for elderly and disabled Americans, is turning 50 this month, and local health care reform advocates plan to mark the occasion with a birthday party on the Corvallis riverfront.

The free event is sponsored by Health Care for all Oregon and Mid-Valley Health Care Advocates and will take place from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at Monroe Plaza, at Southwest First Street and Monroe Avenue next to the Corvallis Farmers Market.

It will feature live music, cupcakes and other party trappings, but don't expect a festive atmosphere. While the event will celebrate Medicare's success in providing coverage for one portion of the population, it will also draw attention to the fact that health care costs remain a tremendous burden for many Americans.

"We see a lot of needless suffering, people knowing that something serious may be going on, they have symptoms that are troubling, but either they have no insurance or they have something that is very common now, a high-deductible health plan ... and they can't afford to go to the doctor," said Dr. Mike Huntington, one of the event's organizers.

"(Medical debt) is the leading cause of personal bankruptcy, and of those who face bankruptcy for that, at least 60 percent had what they thought was insurance."

Medicare and Medicaid, the federal health insurance plan for the poor, do a good job of providing access to health care, Huntington said, and volunteers will be on hand Saturday to help eligible people sign up for both programs. A half-dozen or so speakers, including physicians and business people, will give short talks highlighting some of the benefits of Medicare and contrasting it with for-profit health insurance plans.

What the event's sponsors want to see is the same sort of coverage extended to the rest of the population, an idea often referred to as "Medicare for all." Other developed countries, Huntington argued, provide universal coverage for their citizens while spending less money on health care, achieving better outcomes and eliminating medical bankruptcies.

In this country, resistance remains high to the idea of a government-sponsored, tax-funded health care system, but Huntington believes the political climate is becoming more favorable as soaring medical costs impact a growing share of the population.

"What we see happening is that more and more people are starting to realize there's a problem," he said. "When that happens, that will reach a critical tipping point."