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Caption: More than a dozen people participated in a Medicare Birthday parade Sponsored by Health Care for all Oregon and Mid-Valley Health Care Advocates at Monroe Plaza on Saturday morning.

Medicare birthday party becomes rally for universal health care in America

by [NATHAN BRUTTELL](#)

[Corvallis Gazette-Times](#) July 19, 2015

Health care for everyone. Health care for all.

Those were the chants that rang out from more than a dozen local health care reform advocates Saturday morning at the Corvallis Farmers Market. The dozen advocates marched along the riverfront before stopping near a decorative birthday cake celebrating the 50th anniversary of Medicare, the federal insurance program for elderly and disabled Americans. But the Saturday event morphed from a celebration into a call to action for universal health care.

“We all know someone who hasn’t gotten the treatment they needed because of the costs. We’re all one banana peel away from being in that high-risk pool ourselves,” said co-organizer Dr. Mike Huntington, retired after 22 years as Cancer Center director at Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center. “Every day for more than 20 years I would see people come in with advanced cancers during a time when detection methods were getting better and better. It doesn’t make sense until you understand what was happening to them. They couldn’t afford insurance or a doctor’s visit.”

Huntington said that dozens of patients would wait months or years until their cancers advanced to crisis stages or they would refuse treatment altogether. But not because of pride, he said, because they couldn’t afford treatment and support their families at the same time.

“It was the fear of what it would cost,” Huntington said. “It was the overwhelming idea that they could lose their homes because of hospital bills. Or they didn’t want their families to go without, or go into debt because of the hospital bills. They refused treatment because they needed the money for housing or food.”

Huntington recounted a story of one man who developed throat cancer who refused treatment because it could leave his wife and kids homeless or penniless.

“That kind of conversation was not unusual,” he said. “The most common trigger to bankruptcy is medical costs. And most people who became bankrupt had insurance. And either the fine print didn’t cover it or their deductibles were sky-high and it didn’t matter. If you’re making less than \$30,000 and your deductible is \$5,000, you’re not going to the doctor.”

Several speakers Saturday spoke about some of the benefits of Medicare and the disadvantages of for-profit health insurance plans. Many of the members were a part of the sponsor groups Care for all Oregon and Mid-Valley Health Care Advocates. The two groups

regularly appeal to politicians to consider sweeping changes to the health care system and providing universal health care to all Americans.

“The only way to make a change is to get involved, learn about the issue and be prepared to hear counter-arguments. Powerful people have strong arguments against universal health care,” Huntington said. “They’ll say ‘It’s going to interfere with my freedoms’ or ‘I don’t want it because it’s government run.’ If you’re used to thinking about it, you’ll see there’s more freedom with access to health care and you’ll make a difference when you argue for it.”

Co-organizer Bobbi Hall, the newly elected chair of the Mid-Valley Health Care Advocates, said it is important for people to remember that they are not alone in wanting to see change to the health care system in America.

“We are not alone in this fight and we are gaining,” Hall said. “We’ve supported several bills for universal health care in 2011, 2013 and 2015. The first time we had four co-sponsors. The second time we had 20. Last time we had 26. All this is about letting everyone know that we’re active and making progress and we have allies.”