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Sitting in for health care

January 18, 2015

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Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

Above and below, police remove protesters from the well of the Vermont House chamber Thursday night after a group of health care reform demonstrators refused to leave. Police arrested and removed 29 protesters.

On Thursday, Jan. 8, I was arrested. I was taken into custody by state police for standing up for the rights of the people of Vermont.

Hundreds of us from all over the state went to the State House to speak out for our human right to health care after the governor took it upon himself to abandon Vermont's move to universal health care. Twenty-nine of us put our bodies on the line to demand a public hearing on health care financing, holding a sit-in in the well of the House chamber for five hours, and ending up getting arrested.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

It is in this spirit that we conducted a sit-in in the State House on behalf of the many thousands of people in Vermont who are forced to skip health care because they can't afford medication or the doctor, and the untold numbers who suffer needless pain,

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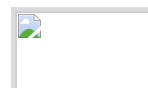


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indignity, financial hardship and debt, because our market-based insurance system grants health care just to those who can afford it, not to all those who need it.

Marching through Montpelier and staging a sit-in wasn't easy for me. I suffer from spinal stenosis, which means my spinal cord is pinched, sending shooting pains into my legs. It is painful for me to march long distances and difficult to sit on the floor for long periods of time. When I was diagnosed five years ago, after years of inexplicable pain, I was fortunate to have a comprehensive health insurance plan. I owned my own business and could afford a plan with good benefits.

Then things started to go downhill. The doctors tried a bunch of treatments, but nothing worked. I had surgery on my back, yet my legs got progressively worse. It got to the point that I couldn't work any more, and I lost my business. I was put first on Social Security disability, then on Medicaid, and finally on Medicare, even though I wasn't 65 years old. With that came 20 percent co-pays and other out-of-pocket costs that I couldn't afford.

At one point I got a blood clot, so I had to go in three times a week to get blood tests. Each visit cost me a \$40 co-pay, and before I knew it, my savings were completely wiped out. I took a job at a hospital where I made a little over minimum wage, but they terminated me because of my condition. I was going without medication, and my children would come to the house and find that there wasn't any food in the fridge. I was ashamed. It was a bad, bad situation.

My story is one of many. In every community and just about every family, there is someone struggling with the cost of health care. As part of my media work, I've interviewed a ton of people about their health care stories, and it seems like most of them are under-insured or have no insurance. People break down and cry when they talk to me, and every time it breaks my heart.

The crazy part is Vermont already spends more than enough money on health care to give every last resident access to the care they need. The problem is that the private insurance system isn't designed to guarantee access to health care. It's an insurance business: It only makes money if we don't get sick and if we don't use health services. A universal, publicly financed health care system turns this on its head. It starts with the premise that every human being living in Vermont has a fundamental right to health care, and then determines how to equitably finance the system through public taxation so that everyone supports the system according to their ability, with big businesses and wealthy people contributing the most.

When Gov. Peter Shumlin dropped his commitment to universal health care, I was shocked. Is it right that in a democracy, especially when we have a universal health care law in place, one person can just make such a decision, without even a debate? His own financing report shows that 93 percent of families would enjoy higher incomes if we went ahead with his plan, and we could do even better than the governor if we taxed employers on a

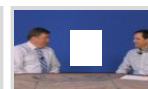
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sliding scale, just like individuals, to give small businesses a break and require big businesses to pay their fare share.

The governor did not back down from his health care plan because it wasn't economically feasible. Universal, publicly financed health care is both eminently feasible and morally just. The governor's decision to back down was a political decision influenced by powerful business interests. Closed-door meetings with business councils will never serve the needs and the rights of the public.

Will our Legislature commit to a transparent, participatory democratic process that allows us all to seriously evaluate health care financing, or will it blindly accept the assessment coming out of the governor's insiders' process? Don't they trust democracy or don't they trust their numbers? Let us hold public hearings and schedule them at times that people can attend. Let us hear from the people, and let us hear from the many experts who believe Vermont can do this. Let us uphold our democracy, say no to scare tactics and private interests, and commit ourselves to defending the rights and the well-being of our communities. Let us put people first.

Stauch Blaise grew up in Barre and lives in East Randolph.

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