

# 29 arrested after Statehouse protest

[April Burbank](#) and [Mike Donoghue](#), Free Press Staff Writer 5:46 a.m. EST January 9, 2015

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(Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)



Single-payer protester is arrested after refusing to leave the Statehouse in Montpelier on Thursday. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

MONTPELIER Vermont legislators say several dozen demonstrators who favor single-payer health care hurt their cause by disrupting the inauguration of Gov. Peter Shumlin and a minister trying to lead the closing benediction.

Police arrested 29 demonstrators on charges of unlawful trespass shortly after 8 p.m. Thursday when they refused numerous requests to leave the Statehouse. Nine of them also face charges of resisting arrest, state police said.

Some walked out voluntarily with law enforcement officers. Others insisted that they be dragged out by state troopers and Washington County Deputy Sheriffs.

At least one continued singing protest songs as police dragged him out. another criticized police, saying he was not resisting arrest.

"You're hurting me! You're hurting me!" another woman screamed as police carried her from the room by her arms after she refused to stand and walk out on her own.



"You're hurting me!" she says. "We're doing the best we can," replies a Vermont State Police Trooper as they remove a woman who refused to stand during sit-in protest on the floor of the House in Montpelier, Thursday, Jan. 8, 2015. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

State police videotaped each arrest. They are due in court Feb. 26, Capt. Paul White said.

The condemnation of the protesters' conduct came from members of all three political parties, who said they were unimpressed by what they considered rude, unprofessional and disruptive behavior in a historic Statehouse known for its civility and decorum.

"They should have saved it for another day," said Essex Rep. Linda Myers, R-Essex, who was witnessing her seventh inauguration. She said she can appreciate the protesters' position, but not how they delivered it.

Rep. Carolyn W. Partridge, D-Windham, even tried to intercede during one disruption at the inauguration. She scribbled a large note on a sheet of paper: "You are not doing the cause (my cause) a favor," and signed her name. She held the note up to the demonstrators to no avail.

She was coming to the side of Sergeant-at-Arms Francis Brooks, who wanted some standing protestors to climb down from their perch.

Partridge later told the Burlington Free Press she has supported single-payer for more than 20 years and was disappointed by Shumlin sidelining the plan but also knew it was the right one at this time.

"I have not lost faith. I have not lost hope," she said. "But the protesters need to know they did not help their cause.

"One loses votes as a result of this," she said.

The protesters were there to urge lawmakers and the governor to resume the fight for single-payer and agree on a public financing plan for health care.

Shumlin announced Dec. 17 that he was dropping — for at least this year — his longtime dream of single-payer because Vermont could not afford the cost.



Eight hours after the sit in began, 29 people demanding a hearing on single payer health care in Vermont are arrested and removed from the House floor in Montpelier Thursday, Jan. 8, 2015. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

### **Organizing a protest**

The protesters were organized by the Vermont Workers' Center through the Health Care is a Human Right Campaign. They demanded that House Speaker Shap Smith, D-Morristown, schedule a public hearing on single-payer financing by Jan. 29.

Smith declined, and about 30 protesters remained in the center of the House chamber sitting on the floor.

Smith said later there are hearings being scheduled by a couple of House committees, and people will be given a chance to weigh in.

Brooks, who is responsible for operating the Statehouse, asked the protestors to leave at about 4:15 p.m. They remained seated and continued to sing and chant into the evening.

People remaining in the House chamber were asked to leave and a decision was made that those that did not depart would face possible arrest starting at 8 p.m.

Police moved in. Some demonstrators opted to leave, but almost 30 refused. As police approached each protester, police could be heard saying repeatedly "Please stand up."

Some did. Some didn't. All were arrested.

Speaker Smith said the Statehouse belongs to the people, and the First Amendment right to protest has always been honored. He initially declined to pass judgment on the tactics of the protesters but later said their behavior was not something he would have done.

"What I would do and what they would do probably are different things, but you know I'm just a guy from Wolcott," Smith told reporters.

One person pleased with the protest was one of the chief organizers.

James Haslam, executive director of the Vermont Workers' Center, called the day's demonstration "incredibly effective overall" and said "it was absolutely peaceful and civil."

"We came here today with hundreds of people to say ... that this is something that is far too important to not move forward on," Haslam said.



Protesters demanding a hearing for single payer health care in Vermont, remain on the floor of the House into the night after staging a sit in during Gov. Peter Shumlin's inaugural address Thursday, Jan. 8, 2015. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

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He said the protesters who disrupted the proceedings at the end of the inaugural ceremony were confused and deviated from the group's overall plan.

"They thought that basically the event was over after the governor spoke," Haslam said. "They were trying not to disrupt the actual speaking, and they just started too soon."

As the inaugural ceremony drew to a close, at least one protester sang from the balcony of the House chamber, shouting over a benediction given by the Rev. Robert Potter of Peacham Congregational Church.

Potter took the interruptions with humor, poking fun a couple of times.

"Don't worry, I've got the mic," he said at one point. "I can outshout them." But they continued to try to distract him during the solemn closing.

More reaction

Rep. Christopher Pearson, P-Burlington, said the protesters had "ruffled a lot of feathers and not helped their immediate cause."

"I'd like to think we can get over it and move forward with important policy work," Pearson said.

Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Keith Flynn said it was his call that Shumlin, the five Vermont Supreme Court justices and some honored guests were escorted out the back side of the House chamber because of safety concerns.

"I did it because of everything that was going on," Flynn said. He said some protestors came in during the speech and sat down in the aisles making it hard for people to enter or leave the chamber.

The dignitaries had all entered through the main door and were led to their seats by Vermont National Guard honorees.

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**Single-payer protesters are arrested after refusing to leave the Statehouse in Montpelier on Thursday, January 8, 2015. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)**

Flynn said he believed the Vermont State Police had a proper response.

"They showed great restraint," Flynn said.

Barre Mayor Thom Lauzon, a Republican, was a little less sympathetic to the disruption. He challenged one protester to leave the balcony.

Two Colchester representatives from different parties also were unimpressed by the conduct of the protesters.

"I don't think they did their cause any good," Rep. Jim Condon, D-Colchester.

Rep. Patrick Brennan, R-Colchester, said the demonstration was the biggest disruption he has seen in his 13 years in serving in Montpelier.

Brennan said there have been a few minor disruptions in the Statehouse and at least one sign unfurled during an address by Gov. James Douglas.

House Republican Leader Don Turner said he thought the demonstrators crossed the line when they stretched out in the aisles on the House floor and began singing.

"I thought they really hurt their cause," said Turner, who has been a critic of Shumlin's health care proposals.

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Single-payer protestors disrupt Gov. Peter Shumlin's inauguration ceremony at the Statehouse in Montpelier on Thursday, January 8, 2015. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

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Potter took the interruptions with humor. "Don't worry, I've got the mic," he said at one point. "I can outshout them." But later, he seemed to struggle to finish the benediction over the distraction.

The disruption of the benediction was among several "spontaneous" actions, said Keith Brunner, a spokesman for the Workers' Center.

Regardless of whether legislators or the public agreed with the demonstration, Brunner said, the single-payer health care law, known as Act 48, remains in place.

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"We came here today with hundreds of people to say ... that this is something that is far too important to not move forward on," Haslam said.

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Single-payer protesters sit down in the well of the House chamber after Gov. Peter Shumlin's inauguration ceremony at the Statehouse in Montpelier on Thursday, January 8, 2015. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

The protesters who disrupted the proceedings at the end of the inaugural ceremony were confused and deviated from the group's overall plan, Haslam said.

"They thought that basically the event was over after the governor spoke," Haslam said. "They were trying not to disrupt the actual speaking, and they just started too soon."

As of 5:30 p.m., the protesters remained seated on the floor of the House chamber, long after the sergeant-at-arms had instructed them to prepare to leave the building.



Nearly eight hours into sit in, Vermont State Police give the order to leave and then arrest and remove protesters one by one from the House floor Thursday, Jan. 8, 2015. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

Contributing: Associated Press. Contact April Burbank at 802-660-1863 or [aburbank@freepressmedia.com](mailto:aburbank@freepressmedia.com). Follow her on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AprilBurbank](http://www.twitter.com/AprilBurbank).

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