



OP-ED From VWC Director

Vermont Must Lead the Way on Healthcare

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By James Haslam

President Obama calls the healthcare crisis "the greatest threat" to our nation's economy. He wants a public option to compete with private insurance. Given our experience with Catamount Health, Vermonters know half-measures won't solve the crisis. We need fundamental change. The lack of political will to stand up to the healthcare corporations results in nothing more than tinkering around the edges of a healthcare mess. Vermonters will have to lead the way by establishing healthcare not as a market commodity but as a basic human right.

Like Catamount Health, the current proposed federal reforms will help a tiny percentage of people, and politicians will claim to have addressed the healthcare problem. But unless we get rid of private insurance companies, public options cannot fix the problem. Two years after launching Catamount Health, the situation in Vermont worsens every day. Similarly, Obama's public option will not solve the national healthcare crisis because we still won't have addressed the largest source of profit and waste.

Having healthcare as a human right means that we'll pool our money together to provide health care for everyone who needs it, like having a fire department, public education system and maintained roads. The problem with having private insurers involved is that they are set up under a business model, not a public health model. That means they make money by insuring healthy people — not sick people. So private insurers love having public programs (Medicaid, Medicare, Veteran Affairs, etc.) to cover the sick, so they can "cherry pick" healthy people and pocket the premiums. Imagine having a healthcare system that's geared toward making people healthy instead of making corporations wealthy.

In 2008, the Vermont Workers' Center started a grassroots campaign called "Healthcare Is a Human Right" to help make health a basic public good for all. We surveyed fifteen hundred Vermonters about their values and experiences with healthcare. Ninety-five percent of them believe healthcare is a human right. Two out of three Vermonters, at some time, refrained from seeking healthcare services they needed because they could not afford them. It is appalling that people do not have access to basic healthcare services and prevention. We found a lot folks that agree. Almost everyone we speak to agrees that not only would having healthcare as a basic right better reflect our basic values, but also most people believe that only by eliminating all the profit and waste will we be able to afford it.

We also found a lot of people who were greatly disturbed about William Milnes Jr.'s \$7.25 million golden parachute. Milnes is the Vermont Blue Cross & Blue Shield (BCBS) CEO who retired last year.

You see, just as Vermont's healthcare crisis was growing worse and worse for Vermonters as costs skyrocketed, apparently BCBS was feeling really good about the direction things were taking and wanted to thank their departing leader's contribution to this progress (See Seven Days 3/18/09). In countries where people have healthcare as a basic right, if somebody made \$7.25 million off the system, they would go to jail.

On Friday, May 1st, 2009 we coordinated a "Healthcare Is A Human Right" rally at the Statehouse which drew over twelve hundred Vermonters. We were told this was the largest weekday rally in modern Vermont history. This turnout represents the beginning of a new grassroots network across the state whose sole mission is to redefine healthcare as a basic public good rather than a market commodity.

Lots of people, including President Obama, admit that a single-payer system would make the most sense. But they say it's not politically possible. Our goal all along has been to change what is "politically possible" by getting enough of us organized so we can make politicians listen to what the people want, not what the insurance companies, the pharmaceutical industry and the other groups profiting off the healthcare system want. Can we make it happen in Vermont? Well, the excuse up until now has been Governor Jim Douglas, who has promised to veto single-payer healthcare (and, frankly, anything that resembles progress in general). The great news is that vetoes are no longer enough to stop progress in Vermont.

Yes, we believe that Vermonters have a historic opportunity to once again help lead the nation on issue of basic civil rights and social justice. It has long been known that a single-payer system, with a single public health funding agency, would be able to cover everybody while saving millions of dollars by eliminating the waste and profiteering of our current private insurance system. Over the next ten months we will be working with a network of hundreds of Vermonters — including businesses, labor unions and community organizations — to pass single-payer healthcare legislation (H.100 and S.88).

Another excuse we were given is that we would need federal waivers to make a Vermont single-payer system work. Understanding that current federal healthcare reform plans would not solve the problem, our own Senator, Bernie Sanders, introduced a bill to help states like Vermont set up their own single-payer system. Once seen as a long shot, this bill which would grant the needed federal waivers automatically, is gaining more momentum as the national single-payer movement grows and pressures President Obama. But even if Senator Sanders' bill doesn't pass in the next year, we can still pass state legislation for single-payer and apply for the waivers.

We know there will be Vermont legislators who say that it's still not possible. But we are finding more and more Vermonters who are sick of excuses. If you believe that we need a real healthcare system now, there are people in your community who agree with you. And the people will win over the profiteers. We're getting organized.

James Haslam is the Director and Lead Organizer of the Vermont Workers' Center, whose office is in Burlington. More information can be found at www.workerscenter.org (<http://www.workerscenter.org>)

Healthcare Headache Lies in Vermont

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