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Locals Discuss Health Care Reform at Town Hall Meeting

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It was an appropriate setting for a town hall meeting in Columbia on health care reform — the Drew Wellness Center, a facility dedicated first and foremost, as reflected in its name, to prevention.

It was early evening July 6, and about 125 people showed up at the giant building downtown on Harden Street to talk about the most pressing issue on the domestic front.

The dynamics working in favor of reform are strong for their bleakness.

“Forty-six million Americans, including 750,000 South Carolinians, are going uninsured,” Sue Berkowitz, director of the Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, said in kicking off the forum.

Many more are underinsured, and the numbers of people in both categories have been increasing for years.

At the same time, health care costs have been spiraling out of control for just as long and exacting a crushing toll on household and business finances. Citing a study, Berkowitz said that 50 percent of personal bankruptcies in the nation stem from medical bills. Some of the people on hand at the town hall meeting told proverbial horror stories to that effect.

Wheelchair bound, 53-year-old Cyndy Martin of Columbia said her medical expenses have wiped her out financially. It took years for her to become eligible for Medicare, Martin said.

Joanne Jackson said her daughter, Ashley Bell, a medical school student at George Washington University, lost her health insurance when she turned 25 “simply because of her age.”

It is ironic, Jackson said, elaborating that she is employed with Healthy Learners, a local nonprofit that works with children who lack adequate insurance. “It is a proven fact that poor health can and does impact education and learning,” she said.

One person referenced one of the powerful interests working against reform, saying that insurance companies are causing many of the problems. The gathering subsequently erupted in applause.

A similar meeting took place July 2 in Rock Hill and another is scheduled for Saturday in Charleston.

President Obama, who has made health care reform his No. 1 domestic priority, led such a gathering in Virginia on July 6. “Naysayers are already lining up,” Obama said during the meeting, according to a Washington Post report in which he described the matter as a moral and economic imperative.

The president says his goals are to cut costs, maintain quality and extend insurance to all Americans through an optional program and possibly a mandate for large companies to offer coverage to their employees.

Many Republicans and other opponents of universal coverage object to the potential costs of it and government involvement.

In Congress, the House began hearings this week on draft reform legislation, U.S. Rep. James Clyburn said at the Columbian University. Clyburn, a Democrat whose district includes the Capital City, will play a key role in the fate of the legislation because of his position as House majority whip. It is the No. 3 post in the House and charged with lining up votes.

“There are meetings being held like this all over the country,” Clyburn said.

Polls show that a majority of Americans favor universal coverage via the choice of a public plan. And while sectors of the health care world are bent on torpedoing reform, one ginormous player surprisingly isn't.

“Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the world's largest retailer, said on [June 30] that it supports President Barack Obama's push to require employers to offer health insurance to workers,” says a Reuters dispatch of the same date.

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