

PNHPWW 4th Annual Public Meeting



It's Time to Add Your Voice

Health Reform in the Obama Era **Can Change REALLY Happen?**

We had 200 attendees, tables in the lobby for PNHPWW, HCFA-Wa, and the May 30th Mothers March.

Don Mitchell, Chair, PNHPWW, gave the welcoming remarks and briefly described what the Chapter has accomplished in the past year, our current activities, and what we are looking forward to in the coming months (for the purposes of this meeting summary, you are referred to past monthly reports for this info).

Musical entertainment was provided in three segments by Bob, Marcee and Lynda Wickline. Focused on health reform and our opponents. Got lots of positive comments. "Now's the Time" snippet on our internet site at:<http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org/multimedia/Wicklins.mov>

The "2009 John Geyman Health Justice Award" was presented to Bob and Barbara Fithian by long-time collaborator Sherry Weinberg of the PNHPWW Board, for their tireless advocacy for health care reform over the past two decades. They were active in the passage of the Basic Health Plan, co-founders of Health Care for All Washington, co-authors of the single payer Washington Health Security Trust legislation, tireless lobbyists, and are members of PNHPWW.

Congressman Jim McDermott was unable to be in Seattle on this Friday night but provided us with a recorded message from D.C. by DVD. Jim believes that because of the current economic crisis, the sad state of our health care, and the constellation of power in Washington D.C. that we are in a unique period where the chance to achieve meaningful health care reform is more favorable than at any time in the past 20 years, and that if we blow it, we may not have another chance for a very long time. He emphasized that he is still a strong single payer advocate and that single payer supporters should not relent on our advocacy.

Keep it as the gold standard for comparison with any compromise plan that may come out of the current discussions behind closed doors in DC.

That said, Jim believes that the real fight in DC will be how the public option is crafted. He stresses that a public option plan, which is a crucial piece in any compromise legislative package, must have characteristics of a “Medicare for All” single payer system or perhaps, FEHBP, but not be a dumping ground for private insurance companies. There must be a way for anyone to buy into the public plan. He sees the public option as a way to get to single payer. But it must be a strong public option with community rating across the US; a weak one is not worth fighting for. To see a video snippet of Jim’s talk go to:
<http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org/multimedia/McDermott.mov>

Robby Stern, Chair of the Healthy Washington Coalition, was introduced by friend of forty years, David Loud. Robby stressed that we are on the cusp of change in our health care system that our forbearers struggled for. Robby believes that although SP would be best, “we won’t have it at this moment, but we are on the road to getting there.” The battle now is to make sure we have a viable public option that people can choose.

We must not underestimate the power of pushback of our opposition and our need to organize. We need to get out in the streets for the May 30th Mothers March for to make it the largest demonstration ever for HC reform in Washington State. Calls for every one to pull together to work for HC for all in 2009.

To see a video snippet of Robby’s talk go to:
<http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org/multimedia/Robby.mov>

Oliver Fein, National President PNHP, Assoc Dean and Professor Clinical Med and Public Health, at Weill Cornell Medical College was introduced by David McLanahan, who has crossed paths with Oli for 50 years since Swarthmore College days, in New York City in the social struggles of the early 70’s, and again with the formation of the PNHPWW Chapter 4 ½ years ago.

Oli started his presentation with a description of his experiences as a participant at President Obama’s Health Care Summit in Wash DC. The circumstances of his invitation and his observations are available at:
<http://www.pnhp.org/blog/2009/03/09/dr-oliver-fein-reports-on-the-white-house-health-summit/>

Basically, the difference between Obama's approach and that of the Clinton's is that Obama wants legislation to be bipartisan and has shifted responsibility to Congress to come up with a plan. At the "Summit" there was no discussion of contentious issues such as mandates or taxing employer health insurance, much less single payer or the public option.

Oli stresses that single payer is the "elephant under the table" that everyone in DC does not want to acknowledge, but certainly are aware is there. Advocates should keep the pressure on to keep SP as the gold standard, with lots of grassroots activity behind it, as this will push reform in the right direction.

Oli believes a public option could go two ways. The first as a Medicare-like program or as a private insurance exchange like the FEHBP. He pointed out several criticisms of FEHBP – 10 – 15% of government workers can't afford it and premiums are not progressive. Insurance companies get around "standard package" requirements and insure profits by varying premiums based on deductibles and co-pays, making this insurance unaffordable for many.

We must look very closely for and reject any private option that is limited to the individual market and does not have automatic enrollment for the uninsured. He pointed out that a public option in a hybrid system would achieve only 1/7th of the administrative savings of a SP system because of the persistent need to account for and bill lots of different plans. Also, that Medicare HMO's end up subsidizing private HMO's as per Medicare Advantage plans. The latter's 11-19% subsidy is borne by the overall Medicare program – i.e. the subscribers in the traditional program.

Another point Oli made was in alluding to an upcoming study to be published this summer in a major peer review journal. This study found that a primary care physician spends an average of 1 – 1.5 months per year on paperwork, much of it related to insurance issues. With true single payer, this physician would recoup most of this time for care delivery, and globally, this would help solve the access problems we have now and when the uninsured are absorbed into a new system.

The discussion/Q&A focused on "what would a public option look like that could achieve its goals?" Prefacing this question with PNHP's position that it does not support the hybrid system, and that it is important to remain SP activists to get a public option that might be a "potential" step to more

fundamental reform, Oli, listed again that it must be open to all, Medicare-like with comprehensive benefits, and with automatic enrollment.

To see a video snippet of Oli's talk go to:

<http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org/multimedia/Fein.mov>

Oli's sides bearing on health care reform options are available via our web site

Oli's Other Activities while in Seattle:

1. Grand Rounds at UW Department of Medicine. Auditorium filled – Oli's grand rounds slideshow is available on request to PNHPWW.

2. Meeting with UW medical students and house staff. This was a luncheon meeting organized by some med student activists with assistance from Rick Arnold, UW physician and PNHPWW member. About 45 turned out for a back & forth discussion on the future of health care from a health sciences student's perspective.

3. Interview on the KIRO Dave Ross Show – to hear it click on the Dave Ross photo on our PNHPWW home page at:
<http://www.pnhpwesternwashington.org>

4. Meeting with single payer activists – Oli met with 16 SP activists on Saturday for about 2.5 hours to discuss strategy to push SP forward.

We talked about what SP resources we have in Washington State. We need to be clear that SP is evidence-based and not an "ideology." We are not idealogues. History bears us out that incremental reforms fail.

We need to pressure Congressional committees looking at health care reform to include SP advocates and insist the Congressional Budget Office evaluate SP (HR676/1200; S703) alongside any other reforms Congress looks at.

Mandates are an insurance company bailout and they don't do anything for the underinsured.

Sell yourself to Congressional staff as a resource as "knowing a lot about these issues."

There was lots of discussion about SP and the public option. Much summarized above. Craig Salins collated points in the discussion as to what a public plan must contain. After some input from others – the final result is attached along with the April Meeting and Monthly Report and will be added to the PNHPWW web site.