

# METROLAND

The Alternative Newsweekly of New York's Capital Region

## Universal Need

Health-care advocates converge in Albany to press for statewide reform

June 9, 2008

"I still have a dream, today, in 2008," breast cancer survivor Brenda Frost bellowed over the heads of almost 200 people at the Legislative Office Building, "a dream of a brighter future, of a place where I will not be judged by my wealth in society." Frost's dream was shared by the 35 people who told their stories before a panel of state officials on May 28 in hopes of convincing legislators of the importance of moving universal health care forward in New York state.



Health care is a right: Assemblyman Richard Gottfried.

Photo: Chris Mueller

The dream is to fix what Frost called "a broken health-care system," by implementing a plan for universal health coverage for all New Yorkers.

"Lobbyists representing Big Pharma and HMO's flood the halls of the Legislature day and night opposing fundamental reforms of our broken system. This hearing is designed to make sure that for once, the experiences and views of average New Yorkers are heard in this debate," said Jessica Wisneski, campaigns director coordinator for Citizen Action of New York. Citizen Action, along with Health Care for All New York, sponsored the hearing.

After nearly a year of studies and hearings, a task force created in by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer will be releasing at least three proposals for universal health-care coverage in New York later this month. The task force, in interdepartmental committee known as Partnership for Coverage will release at least three models for universal health care, said Joseph Baker, the assistant deputy secretary for Health and Human Services, and make them available for public comment.

"These are just the proposals, and then we have to work with the legislators," said Baker. "I don't want to create false optimism; there is still a lot of work to be done."

Assemblyman Richard N. Gottfried (D-Manhattan), the chair of the Assembly Committee on Health, also spoke at the hearing. He said that the stories further illustrated the need for universal health care in the state. He briefly outlined his own proposal, "New York Health Plus: Better Coverage for All of Us at Lower Cost," based on the current New York Family and Child Health Plus plans.

Family and Child Health Plus is a nonprofit health-care program that makes comprehensive health coverage available to low-income, uninsured families. Gottfried's proposal basically takes the widespread program and makes it an option for every resident in the state.

"By offering publicly sponsored, publicly funded coverage as a choice available to everyone," said Gottfried, "we can make New York dramatically more employer-friendly and job-friendly by eliminating the need for any employer to provide health coverage for its workers. When employers and individuals don't have to be 'taxed' by insurance-company premiums and deductibles, most people's take-home pay will go up."

Under Gottfried's proposal, New Yorkers would be able to keep their private health plan, and would receive a "tax benefit" to insure that they do not pay for insurance coverage twice.

Gottfried's proposal, said Richard Kirsch, director of Citizen Action of New York, "would offer quality affordable health care to all New Yorkers. It will make New York a much more healthy place to live, work and do business. It sets a high standard that we hope other reform proposals will also reach."

Plus, Gottfried claimed, his plan would save \$4 billion of the \$63 billion spent per fiscal year.

"I was out mowing the lawn, and I had a heart attack," said John McCallen. "Now all of my money goes toward paying my bills."

He said that after his heart attack last year, he began paying \$780 per month for prescription drugs and still does today. On top of the money spent on drugs, McCallen pays numerous medical bills associated to the heart attack as well as internal injuries he suffered from a separate car accident.

McCallen, a professor at Broome Community College in Binghamton, came to the People's Public Hearing in Albany May 28 to get an idea of how many New Yorkers are uninsured. "There are 17 full-time teachers in my department, and eight of them are uninsured."

"I want universal health coverage," McCallen said. "But you have to have a choice, [universal health care] has to be affordable, and it has to be so they can't cancel it. I am one of the working uninsured, and there are a lot of them in New York"

**—Chris Mueller**