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Health care rally set to pressure lawmakers

*By John Briggs
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A massive Health Care is a Human Right rally -- potentially the largest weekday rally in state history, its organizers say -- will meet at noon Friday in front of the Statehouse in Montpelier to pressure legislators to create a universal health care system in Vermont.

The rally was previewed Tuesday in a news conference in Burlington City Hall. Mayor Bob Kiss promised he would attend with U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders -- one of the featured speakers -- and reach out to other Vermont mayors to urge them to attend.

Monday, the Burlington City Council unanimously approved a resolution endorsing the rally. "(We) encourage Burlington residents to attend to support health care for all Burlington residents and Vermonters," the resolution said. The council passed a similar resolution in 2005.

Universal health care generally refers to a system in which the government pays for care that is delivered in the private sector.

Kiss said the obstacle to universal health care has been a lack of support in the Legislature, despite statewide surveys by the Commission on Health Care Values and Priorities in 1996 and 1997 showing a majority of Vermonters support such a system.

"We need to move to a health care system that isn't based on employment," Kiss said.

Dawn Stanger, president of the Vermont Workers' Center, the rally organizer, said the time for equivocating is past.

"We've heard enough excuses and see no reasons to wait," she said. "Politicians are standing in the way."

Rabbi Joshua Chasan of Burlington's Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, representing 26 clergy from around the state, said that in the current recession, with many people jolted from their familiar routine, the time might be ripe to reform the country's -- or at least Vermont's -- broken health care system.

"This is not a distant dream," he said. "We can create it in Vermont in the next legislative session."

He said the main obstacle to reform is fear generated by those who profit from the current system. Contact John Briggs at 660-1863 or jbriggs@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com. To have Free Press headlines delivered free to your e-mail, sign up at www.burlingtonfreepress.com/newsletters.