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Big health care rally planned Friday

By DANIEL BARLOW Vermont Press Bureau

MONTPELIER – During her years working for non-profit organizations, Peg Franzen saw the same story over and over again.

First, a person gets hit with a surprise medical problem – and they have no insurance. Then they lose their job. And finally, they lose their home.

Franzen, a retired resident of Montpelier, said she has witnessed many Vermonters between 40 and 60 years old suddenly have their entire lives derailed by the financial burdens of a medical illness because they lack health insurance.

"We really need to have a health care system that is based on moral values rather than the market economy," she said Monday.

Health care has received little attention in this year's legislative session in Vermont. But residents worried about the future of the system will gather at the Statehouse on Friday for what promises to be a massive rally.

Organized by the Vermont Worker's Center and sponsored by more than 100 other organizations and groups in Vermont, Friday's "Health Care is a Human Right" rally will draw attention to two bills that would institute a single-payer health care system in the state.

James Haslam, the director of the Worker's Center, said the estimate is that more than 1,000 people will turn out for the rally, which begins at noon on the Statehouse lawn.

"We believe that this will be the largest political rally for health care reform in the history of the state of Vermont," Haslam said. "It may be one of the biggest rallies in Vermont ever."

The Vermont Worker's Center launched its Health Care is a Human Right campaign last year, and this Friday's rally will be its first major step toward building a grassroots coalition around health care reform.

Speakers at the rally include Dr. Deb Richter, a Montpelier resident who has been a force for single-payer health care at the Statehouse, and U.S. Sen. Bernard Sanders, who has sponsored legislation at the federal level.

The rally will also include street theater, giant puppets and a "dump-the-insurance-companies" dunk tank.

"There has been resistance to single-payer because of how invested those who make money off health care are in the political system," Haslam said, "The pharmaceutical companies, the

insurance companies ... they make their profit off of our health."

Sen. Doug Racine, D-Chittenden, the chairman of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee, said Monday that he is a supporter of single-payer health care, but added that creating such a system is never as easy as simply passing a bill.

His committee held a hearing last week on a Senate bill that would begin to create such a health care system. Racine said even supporters who testified in favor of the bill said Vermont would require waivers from the federal government.

"For a true single-payer system in Vermont, we would need to opt out of programs such as Medicaid and Medicare," Racine said. "And that can't happen without a waiver from the federal government , and I doubt it would happen under the administration of Gov. Douglas."

Racine said he's hoping that President Barack Obama's health care reforms, which are expected to be unveiled later this year, will include provisions to allow states such as Vermont to begin testing certain reforms.

"I think there is a lot of interest in seeing what Vermont can do," Racine said.

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