

## Health horror stories heard at forum

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Friday, February 20 BENNINGTON — Erica Rogers, a cancer survivor, thought her worries about health insurance would be over when she was approved for the state's new Catamount Health plan.

"I thought, 'this is going to be great, I finally have health insurance' — until I got the bill," she said Thursday during a forum on health care sponsored by the Vermont Workers' Center.

Different stories

Unfortunately for Rogers, the highly touted, state-sponsored health plan had a one-year waiting period and a clause concerning pre-existing conditions.

"One year is a really long time to wait for health insurance," she said.

For John Chambers, an unfortunate accident left him hospitalized, and back to work while recovering from a broken pelvis.

"Three days in the hospital cost me \$10,000. I don't have health insurance," he said.

About 66,000, or 11 percent of the state's population, are currently without insurance, according to James Haslam, director of VWC. Many more — 180,000, or one-third of the population — are underinsured, meaning their coverage does not allow for all necessary appointments and procedures, he said.

Volunteers with the Vermont Workers' Center have been surveying Vermonters from across the state for months about their personal experiences with the health care system. The group says the results are evident — Vermonters believe health care is a human right, and many are suffering because they lack quality, affordable health care.

"Health care is in a crisis situation in many Vermonters lives," Haslam said. "We've found that over 95 percent of Vermonters surveyed believe it is a human right."

The crisis is only growing worse as the state's budget problems have led to Gov. James Douglas calling for cuts to state health programs, Haslam said.

"It's a basic attack on the human right to health care," he said.

America has recognized the right to education, but has so far failed to see health care in the same light, according to Haslam. A big reason, he said, is the undue influence private insurance and pharmaceutical companies have on the political process.

Vermont legislators understand the need for a "universal and equitable" health care system, but have not had the political will to enact such a system.

"They say, 'I agree, health care should be a human right, it's just not politically possible,'" Haslam said.

Officials at the Southwest Vermont Medical Center agreed the current health care system is broken. Kevin MacDonald, the hospital's vice president of marketing, said it was a "perverse, irrational" system that sought to fix people rather than keep them well.

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"It's not working for us and it's not working for you," he said.

But SVMC President and CEO Harvey Yorke said the problem is large and complex, and a small state like Vermont cannot afford the transition to a universal health care system on its own.

"The reality is, is that health care can't be changed community by community. It is a national problem," Yorke said. "Having said that, we're not giving up."

Haslam said the goal of VWC is to build political support ahead of a statehouse rally on May 1 for a health care system that will guarantee care to all Vermonters regardless of income.

"We're showing them and we're showing ourselves," he said.

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