

NEWS FROM

Assembly Health Committee Chair Richard N. Gottfried

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**Universal Health Care Bill Advances in Albany
Key Lawmakers Introduce "New York Health Plus" Bill;
Health Care Workers Union 1199 SEIU, State Medical Society,
NYS Nurses Association, and Health Care for All New York at Press Conference**

"New York Health Plus," a universal health care bill, has been introduced in Albany by the chairs of the Assembly and Senate Health Committees. Under the plan, all New Yorkers would be eligible to enroll in a comprehensive health plan offered by New York State free of premiums and deductibles.

"We can get better coverage, get all of us covered, and save billions by having New York offer a publicly-sponsored health coverage option, like Medicare or Child Health Plus but for everyone. And people who want to can keep the coverage they have," Assembly Health Committee chair Richard N. Gottfried said.

"New York Health Plus builds on the state's existing healthcare programs to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to the health coverage that they need," Mr. Gottfried said. "New York State needs to take a leadership role in the national conversation on healthcare coverage and New York Health Plus is an important step in that direction."

"During this economic downturn, it is critical that working families have the security of healthcare coverage as more and more New Yorkers lose their jobs and health benefits. New York Health Plus would provide access to healthcare for over 2 million uninsured New Yorkers," said George Gresham, President of 1199 SEIU, representing 275,000 health care workers.

David T. Hannan, MD, MPA, President of the Medical Society of the State of New York said, "MSSNY recognizes the NY Health Plus proposal as a possible first step toward addressing the problem of the uninsured and health care delivery in the State of New York."

"The New York State Nurses Association was pleased to work with Assemblyman Gottfried and Senator Duane on this important legislation," said Tina Gerardi, RN, chief executive officer of the New York State Nurses Association. "Nurses believe that quality, affordable health care should be accessible to all. New York Health Plus is an opportunity to show the nation how to achieve this goal. We support this bill."

How "New York Health Plus" Would Work

The new plan - called New York Health Plus - builds on the highly popular and successful Family Health Plus and Child Health Plus programs to provide a full benefit package that is more comprehensive than most commercial health insurance programs. All New Yorkers would be eligible, regardless of wealth. Individuals would choose from among participating health plans, as is now done under Family Health Plus and Child Health Plus. The state would also run a fee-for-service option.

Under this plan, no one would have to give up the doctors or other providers they use. Instead of individuals and employers paying premiums, the state would set and pay the premium. Deductibles would also be eliminated and co-payments would be non-existent or nominal, as they are under Family Health Plus. The bill is A. 7854 and S. 4884.

In Washington, President Obama and key congressional leaders have made a priority of including a public insurance option in proposals for health care reform.

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"People ask whether this is politically realistic," said Assembly Member Gottfried. "New York Health Plus would make New York more job-friendly by cutting the cost of health coverage, let people keep the coverage they now have if they want to, and offer better coverage with fairer financing. I think that's politically realistic."

"People talk of 'building on the existing system' and 'a building-block approach' for universal coverage. New York Health Plus builds on the parts of the system that make sense and work, instead of the parts of the system that do not," said George Gresham, President of 1199 SEIU. "All patients who choose to join the plan - rich and poor - and health care providers would be in the same boat. That is the best guarantee that the Governor and the Legislature (not insurance companies) would make sure it is the best possible boat by balancing pressure to control costs and pressure to provide better care."

"Patient protection is paramount," said David T. Hannan, MD, MPA, President of the Medical Society of the State of New York. "Five health insurers in New York State insure 75% of the managed care market. We believe that NY Health Plus not only offers a potentially meaningful vehicle to address the uninsured but also it could be an effective counterbalance to proprietary health insurance company abuses particularly in the area of

unfair coverage limitations placed on patients and gross disincentives to physicians, hospitals and other providers."

"Premiums are a regressive 'tax' we pay to insurance companies. They charge the same premium, regardless of whether the person being covered is a receptionist or the company president, and regardless of whether an employer is a huge prosperous company or a small business struggling to get by," said Gottfried. "We wouldn't pay for public education that way. New York Health Plus would apportion the cost of health coverage with fairness and equity."

New York Health Plus would save \$20-30 billion of the over \$100 billion we now spend on premiums, deductibles and co-payments. New York State would pay for the coverage (plus Federal matching funds where eligible), using revenue based on ability to pay, from an assessment modeled on the Medicare payroll assessment, plus an assessment on upper-bracket non-wage-and-salary taxable income.

The cost of New York Health Plus would not be new spending by taxpayers. For most, it will be a substantial reduction in what they are now spending. 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.

For those who choose to opt out of New York Health Plus, the proposal includes a tax benefit to ensure that they are not forced to "pay twice" for insurance coverage.

Praise for New York Health Plus

A number of organizations representing consumers, health care professionals and providers, clergy, and labor are already commending Gottfried for his proposal.

Karen Scharff, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York said, "New York Health Plus would offer quality affordable health care to all New Yorkers, from a choice of health care plans and providers while making health care more affordable to families, businesses and taxpayers. 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."

Elizabeth Swain, CEO of the Community Health Care Association of New York State (CHCANYS), said, "Community health centers know first hand how important Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus have been in improving access to quality health care. Coverage matters: reliable, affordable, comprehensive insurance coverage for all New Yorkers is essential to keep costs down by keeping people healthy and ensuring that they can get primary and preventive care and manage chronic conditions. New York Health Plus will provide the coverage everyone needs so all New Yorkers get the health care they deserve."

"This is an exciting and ambitious plan to achieve health care for all New Yorkers by building on our State's innovative and beloved Child Health Plus and Family Health programs that have provided care to millions of New Yorkers for the past twenty years," said Elisabeth Benjamin, Director of the Community Service Society's Healthcare Restructuring Initiatives.

"The New York Health Plus bill put forward by Assembly member Gottfried and Senator Duane has much merit and deserves serious consideration by the Legislature," said Jessica Wisneski of Citizen Action of New York, representing Health Care for All New York, a statewide consumer health advocacy coalition. "Our campaign uses ten standards to evaluate all reform proposals, and the New York Health Plus bill does an excellent job of meeting them. The expansion of New York's Family Health Plus program through public financing would mean that all New Yorkers, regardless of income, would have access to affordable, comprehensive, and reliable coverage."

Lara Kassel, Coordinator of Medicaid Matters New York said, "Medicaid Matters believes that the state's public health insurance programs are critical components of New York's health care system. New York Health Plus builds on the strength of these programs. Family Health Plus, one of New York's great health policy successes, works well because it is comprehensive in scope, covers health conditions across the spectrum, and is administratively efficient. MMNY applauds Assembly Member Gottfried's and Senator Duane's shared goal of expanding and strengthening Family Health Plus, making it available for all New Yorkers."

"There few problems in New York State graver than the plight of those who are uninsured and who need health care services. We see this everyday with the women who come to family planning agencies. These agencies do their best to serve the uninsured and underinsured despite limited resources," said M. Tracey Brooks, President and CEO of Family Planning Advocates of New York State. "Studies have shown that insurance coverage has a direct affect on health outcomes. So we applaud Assemblyman Gottfried and Senator Duane for taking this bold step toward achieving health insurance for all."

Donald Distasio, CEO, American Cancer Society of NY & NJ said, "Surviving cancer can depend on whether or not you have health insurance and the quality of that insurance. Right now, thousands of New Yorkers, including cancer patients, are putting off screenings, not taking prescription medicines and skipping appointments because they can't afford it. We recognize and commend Assembly Member Dick Gottfried and Senator Tom Duane for seeing the value in driving the debate forward in the midst of this wrenching recession. Our economy will only recover once healthcare reform is achieved, and New York Health Plus will provide accessible, affordable health coverage for all New Yorkers. It is time for action, not only in Albany, but in Washington as well."

The Rev. Daniel B. Hahn, Director of Lutheran Statewide Advocacy and public policy consultant to the New York State Council of Churches, noted, "We no longer can wait for the comfort zones of the privileged few to expand ever so slowly in order to accommodate the human rights of all. For years people have framed the goal of attaining the basic human right to health care in terms of incremental steps, while millions more people are uninsured and underinsured, and the numbers continue to escalate. If you would not take baby steps out of a burning building, you should not take baby steps out of this crisis of health care access. This is the time for bold steps, and I applaud Chairmen Gottfried and Duane's bold step forward today."

ShellyNortz, Deputy Executive Director for Policy with Coalition for the Homeless said: "We are very pleased to support New York Health Plus. It would supply the foundation we need to assure access to comprehensive quality health care for all New Yorkers based on a realistic, inclusive and timely approach to the health insurance crisis in our state."

Judy Wessler, Director of The Commission on the Public's Health System (CPHS), said, "CPHS is committed to fighting for equal access to health care services for all New York residents, regardless of ability to pay, race, ethnicity, or primary language spoken. CPHS supports public health programs that are available and accessible, and assist people in accessing health care services. We applaud the New York Health Plus proposal as an important step forward in making this coverage available to all residents."

Trilby de Jung, Senior Health Law Attorney for the Empire Justice Center said, "Empire Justice is excited about Assembly Member Gottfried's proposal to make one comprehensive, affordable public health insurance plan available to all New Yorkers. His proposal builds on our strong public health programs and avoids an insurance mandate. We look forward to working with the Assemblyman to ensure that the plan for New York includes all essential services and guards against possible inequities based on age, gender or income."

Catherine Abate said, "As President and CEO of Community Healthcare Network, we recognize the importance of providing health care coverage to everyone. Too many are uninsured or underinsured. New York Health Plus gives New York the ability to set high uniform standards, create incentives for primary and preventive care, control costs, and finance health care fairly."

Dr. Lou Levitt, convener of Rekindling Reform , said, "New York Health Plus is clearly a serious effort to achieve truly comprehensive coverage for New York, and, as such, Rekindling Reform welcomes it. We look forward to supporting and contributing to its further development."

Emma Jordan-Simpson, Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund - New York (CDF-NY), said, "CDF-NY applauds New York Health Plus, a broad and sweeping proposal aimed at covering every child and adult. Making coverage available to all of our children, regardless of their family's income, helps New York fulfill its commitment of giving every child a healthy start in life."

"Overall, New York Health Plus represents a very positive approach to achieving universal health care coverage in New York. However it does not create a single payer system which the Academy strongly supports and therefore it does not address some of the most serious deficiencies in the present multi-payer system. Our hope is that the 'Medicare for all' approach inherent in New York Health Plus will be so popular with the public that the program will evolve into a truly streamlined and cost-effective single payer program, with equal coverage for all," said Vito Grasso, Executive Vice President for the New York State Academy of Family Physicians.

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