



REKINDLING REFORM REVIEW – VOL. 1, NO. 3 – OCT. 2007

RR Leads Response to New Spitzer Moves Toward Universal Health Care

Rekindling Reform is joining forces with health advocacy groups to respond to the Spitzer administration's new "Partnership for Coverage" initiative. Along with the Community Service Society (CSS) and the Metro New York Health Care for All Campaign, RR convened a special planning meeting on Wed. afternoon Oct. 10th at CSS (105 E. 22nd St. in Manhattan) to brief people on what is underway and discuss how everyone can best work together to affect the process. About 60 people attended from a variety of organizations, and a lively conversation took place as people shared their priorities for talking points.

A main goal of this meeting was to prepare people for public hearings to be held in New York City on Tues. Oct. 30th and on Long Island on Wed. Dec. 5th. These two hearings, along with four others being held across the state throughout the fall, lie at the center of the Spitzer administration's efforts so far. This series kicked off in early Sept. in Glens Falls (north of Albany in the Adirondacks), where RR and other groups held a rally, spoke to the local press, and presented testimony. RR's co-convenor Sid Socolar gave testimony praising the Governor's new public hearing process, and emphasized the importance of cost control as central to expanding toward universal coverage. He also cautioned against affordability measures that could result in underinsurance, called for improved insurance regulation, stressed the need for social insurance mechanisms (vs. commercial insurance), and recommended exploring partnerships with the federal government. RR's testimony is available at www.rekindlingreform.org. Full details on the Spitzer administration's hearings, including various people's testimony, are available at www.partnership4coverage.ny.gov

RR Meets with State Officials and Advocate Colleagues to Discuss Universal Health Care

Leaders of Rekindling Reform and other local health care advocacy coalitions from across the state took time off from their summer holidays twice to travel to Albany. In mid-July, they met with staff from Governor Spitzer's office, the Department of Health, and the State Insurance Department to discuss the administration's evolving plans to address universal health care reform. Separate meetings that day also included staffs from the Senate Majority, Senate Minority, and the Senate Health

Committee. All meetings stressed the importance of New York moving ahead on this issue, and urged that a unique window of opportunity be seized for action.

A month later, members of the newly-dubbed Statewide Council of Health Reform Coalitions met to discuss strategy for the coming year. Rekindling Reform was represented along with groups from Buffalo, Rochester, Ithaca, Albany, and Kingston. The meeting featured a presentation on the latest public opinion and messaging research from the Herndon Alliance. The group agreed to explore developing a common set of principles for reform, to educate and mobilize their members about the Spitzer administration's hearings, and to develop plans focusing on the Presidential candidates.

RR's Medicare Anti-Privatization Recommendations Move Forward in House

Earlier this year, Rekindling Reform published a major white paper exposing stealth Medicare privatization moves now underway by the Bush administration. The document, titled "Reclaiming and Strengthening Medicare," garnered significant attention in national advocacy circles. Its conclusions called for rolling back major provisions of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 as essential in order to progress toward universal health care reform nationally. (The paper is available on RR's website www.rekindlingreform.org.)

Over the summer, as the House of Representatives crafted its own reauthorization bill for the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), to the surprise of many, Medicare anti-privatization measures were included. The bill, known as the "Children's Health and Medicare Privatization (CHAMP) Act" (H.R. 3162) also included provisions to improve Medicare's benefits and cost-sharing requirements, and to fix some of the more onerous aspects of the new Medicare Part D Rx drug benefit program.

Unfortunately, the Senate's SCHIP reauthorization bill did not address Medicare issues. During the bill reconciliation process in September, the compromise bill dropped them from the House bill, and a "clean" SCHIP bill moved forward to the President who has subsequently vetoed it nonetheless. It is expected that a major Medicare reform bill will be crafted this fall, as Congress is under tremendous pressure from physicians to address reimbursement rates under Medicare. Advocates will be working to ensure that Medicare anti-privatization measures are included in the new legislation.

New York's Child Health Insurance Expansion Stalls in DC

Earlier this year, Governor Spitzer and the State Legislature agreed to dramatically expand New York's "Child Health Plus" program to cover many more uninsured children and adolescents. However, before it could go into effect, the federal government must approve the new structure of New York's program and agree to help finance it. Approval seemed assured under then current federal rules. However, on a Friday evening in mid-August, the Bush administration released new interpretations of these regulations to severely restrict states from moving forward on proposed expansions. It then announced that approval was denied because New York's new plan didn't conform to these new regulations,

Many observers see these moves as actually an attack on Congress (moving to expand SCHIP overall), and on the many states that are moving aggressively to expand their own programs up into the middle class. Many advocates and state governors loudly objected, and the Spitzer administration announced that it would sue the Bush administration over the matter, along with seven other states, claiming Bush was changing the rules in the middle of the game. The new rules would require that all children would have to be uninsured for an entire year before qualifying for a state's program, that families would be required to spend up to 5% of income on cost-sharing measures (premiums, deductibles, co-pays), and that states could not expand their programs up into more middle class levels unless and until 95% of all low-income children were enrolled first, a standard believed impossible to achieve.

Universal Health Care Issue Emerges in Presidential Races

With public opinion polls all showing health care reform as the top domestic policy issue on voters' minds, it's no surprise that candidates of both parties are speaking to the matter. The Democrats seem much more aggressive on the issue, talking at length about it in their debates and on the campaign trail. Republicans are discussing it in much less detail, while sniping from the sides at the Democrats' ideas as "big government socialism." So far, Senator Clinton, Senator Obama, and former Senator Edwards have all released comprehensive reform plans, all of which share many

common elements: expansion of insurance coverage mainly through commercial insurance plans with some public plan choices available, premium subsidies for low-income persons, a requirement that employers make some contribution by purchasing insurance for employees or contributing to a public fund, regulation of private insurance, and a mandate for individuals and families to purchase coverage (often couched as a "last resort".) Rep. Dennis Kucinich has proposed a separate plan to expand Medicare to cover all in America.

To help New Yorkers fully understand candidates' ideas, RR is developing educational materials on what candidates are proposing, and is partnering with the League of Women Voters of New York City and the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University to develop a series of one-on-one conversations with interested candidates to discuss their health reform proposals and the policy and political challenges they present. These forums will offer a substantially longer and more focused look at a candidate's health platform than will have occurred in any other public event .Look for details soon!

New Universal Health Care Foundation Launching in NYC

As if they didn't have enough to do, several leaders of Rekindling Reform have undertaken a separate effort to raise funds for grassroots advocacy efforts, and so are establishing the "New York Universal Health Care Foundation". The fund will seek "legacy donations" to grow an endowment that will be used for grants to local community groups to advocate for universal health care reform. Many traditional funders are leery of grassroots advocacy work, and so this new foundation will fill a vacuum in the funding world.

The Foundation will be holding its inaugural reception on Tuesday evening October 30th, from 5 to 7 p.m., at the Cherkasky-Davis Conference Center, 330 West 42nd St., 33rd fl. Penthouse, in Manhattan. All are welcome to attend. All proceeds will constitute seed money to launch the fund. A \$100 donation is suggested. Honorees for the occasion will be New York State Assembly Health Committee Chair Richard Gottfried, Dr. Oliver Fein of Weill-Cornell Medical College and Physicians for a National Health Program, and the New York State Nurses Association. Complete details are available on the RR website (www.rekindlingreform.org)

Rekindling Reform is a joint project of academic programs, professional associations, civic associations, trade unions, faith communities, and health care advocates aimed at promoting quality affordable health care for all, by conducting educational activities, supporting public discussion and dialogue, and fostering collaboration on advocacy strategies.