

## Jewish groups meet with legislators on health care reform

By David Baugher, Special to the Jewish Light | Posted: Wednesday, March 28, 2012 9:19 am

Supporters of health care reform both vented their unhappiness with the pace of progress and pledged continued action while listening to stories of those affected by health insurance-related problems at a meeting with a panel of nine state legislators at Congregation Shaare Emeth this weekend.

“Instead of looking to the future, instead of looking forward in the best interests of Missourians, our [Missouri] General Assembly has been embroiled in politics, which is incredibly frustrating to watch,” said Megan Burke of the Disability Coalition on Healthcare Reform. “We want our elected officials to do what is best for Missourians by setting up a health insurance exchange that has strong consumer protections as soon as possible.”

Sunday afternoon’s event, sponsored by an array of 16 groups including Shaare Emeth, Central Reform Congregation, the Jewish Community Relations Council, Jewish Family & Children’s Service and the local National Council of Jewish Women, centered primarily on state-level issues related to the 2010 passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the national health care overhaul that mandates the implementation of state insurance exchanges. In Missouri and some other states, the exchanges have encountered legislative resistance from Republicans as lawsuits have wended their way through the federal court system.

This month, the individual mandate, which requires all Americans to purchase health insurance or face a fine, finally landed before the United States Supreme Court which is expected to issue what promises to be its longest-awaited ruling in more than a decade.

This weekend’s event opened with the sometimes emotional stories of individuals who have been impacted by troubles under the current system.

“I want to tell you I’m really not ready to be the poster child for the uninsured,” said Leslie Caplan, a 63-year-old freelance musician. “This was not what I wanted to be doing today.”

Caplan, who serves on the cantorial staff at CRC, was diagnosed with Crohn’s Disease in 2000 and lost her health insurance when she divorced five years later. She now finds herself unable to get even catastrophic coverage despite a lack of symptoms.

“Were I to have a serious illness or accident before I qualify for Medicare in 2013, both my health and my financial security would be in jeopardy,” she said. “I am a contributing member of society, living in the wealthiest country in the world, and yet I live in daily fear of being sick or injured.”

University City resident Erica Douglas told the story of her father Robert, who lost his health insurance after retirement when continuing it would have cost more than his pension. She said he ceased getting the same level of care as he had before and free clinic services proved inadequate. He passed away at age 59 in December.

Douglas called the Affordable Care Act “a step in the right direction.”

“Some people think that no one goes without health care in this country but that’s not true,” she said. “My dad was an example of that.”

Mark Harvey, pastor of Harmony United Methodist Church, said that in his church providing insurance is difficult. It takes nearly 20 percent of his income while lower-paid clergy may spend as much as 35 percent. The church saw a 16 percent premium increase a year ago and some staff are kept part-time because the organization cannot afford to provide them with insurance. He said it is misguided to think that churches or other charitable institutions can provide for the sick and the uninsured.

“Most congregations are having a pretty tough time providing health insurance for our own employees, let alone the thousands of uninsured people in our communities,” he said.

Sue Bohm of Chesterfield told the group that she and her mostly healthy family of four have spent more than \$76,000 on premiums over the past four years with payments rising at an alarming rate. Technically, they are customers of their insurer but she doesn't feel that terminology is appropriate since they can go nowhere else due to preexisting conditions.

“I say that loosely because we are currently at their mercy,” she said.

Bernadette Gronborg, a Festus resident, said she had been denied for hypertension by insurers. The only policy she could afford came through AARP and had a very high deductible. She hoped the state would begin looking at providing rate review and more oversight of the industry.

“Missouri doesn't even require health insurers to file their rate increases with the state,” she said.

Sen. Robin Wright-Jones, whose 5th District comprises an area of St. Louis City that hugs the Mississippi River, said the lack of rate review “grieves” her.

“The thing that struck me was the fact that we do not really have insurance controls in Missouri,” she said. “One of the things I'm going to bring up when the budget gets to the Senate floor is, let's get rid of the Department of Insurance because they are not doing anything for us.”

Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, whose North County district cuts a wide swath from University City to Hazelwood, told of her mother's own experiences getting a colonoscopy. She said she wanted people to gain a clearer understanding of the issue.

“I wish people would just wake up,” she said. “They are not waking up.”

Rep. Susan Carlson harkened back to debate over Medicare decades ago.

“I'm old enough to remember when we started covering older Americans and my grandparents were huge beneficiaries of that,” said Carlson, whose district centers on Forest Park. “My parents didn't have to talk anymore to my aunt and uncle on the phone about which family could kick in some extra money to pay for the emergency squad that had to come and take my grandfather to the hospital.”

Rep. Stacey Newman highlighted attacks on abortion rights in the legislature and gender inequity in insurance pricing.

“Women are not equal in terms of our access to health care, in terms of what we pay and what our premiums are,” said Newman, who represents the Richmond Heights-Clayton area. “I just believe that's totally wrong.”

The proceedings were heavily infused with ill feelings towards the Republican Party. Eight of the nine legislators were Democrats and the other was an independent who caucuses with the Democrats. Thirteen

Republicans, along with 12 other Democrats, were invited to the event but either declined or did not respond, according to organizers.

“The Republican Party is supposed to be the pro-business party and the pro-competition party and they are the ones that are stopping this,” said Senator Joseph Keaveny who represents western parts of the city of St. Louis.

“We need to get the Republicans to understand that it is their children and their grandchildren that are being affected here and we all have to look out for one another,” said Representative Rory Ellinger whose district takes in Wellston and University City.

Many in the GOP have been heavily critical of the Obama administration’s health reform efforts contending they are invasive, expensive and unconstitutional.

A few participants held out hope of bipartisanship however. Southside Rep. Jeanette Mott Oxford said that Rep. Scott Largent, a Republican representing a rural area south of Kansas City, recently pushed a bill to expand insurance for foster parents.

“The Democrats are way better than the Republicans on this issue but there is an appalling lack of political courage on both sides of the aisle,” she said. “We need to stand up and do much better than we are doing.”

Rep. Jill Schupp of Creve Coeur pointed out the Democrats’ shrunken numbers in the General Assembly. The already weakened party was further routed in 2010 elections and now barely has enough strength to sustain a gubernatorial veto.

“This is a time of opportunity for you. Many of you will be in new districts,” she said to the dozens gathered at the temple. “It’s a great time to say to those candidates who are running, ‘What do you believe about affordable care?’ When someone says to me, ‘You mean Obamacare?’ I say, ‘Yes, Obama cares!’”

Tracy McCreery, the sole independent from the Overland/Olivette area, agreed saying she felt the issue was becoming more about money than people.

“Jill talked about the Democrats being small in number,” said McCreery, the most recent arrival to the legislature. “I’ll tell you who is huge in number at the state capitol and as a new person it sticks out like a sore thumb to me. That’s insurance industry lobbyists.”