Vigil held in W.P. for affordable health care

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Fifty-two constituents of Rep. Jason Smith carried signs, spoke with the interested public and made known their support for affordable health care during a vigil held Monday. The group took shifts from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. outside of the Republican’s office on Court Square.

Howell County Stand and Resist is a nonpartisan grassroots organization intended to amplify constituents’ voices to be heard by elected officials in opposition to the current political climate at state and federal levels.

The group called concerned citizens to gather for a vigil in advance of Thursday’s anticipated vote to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA) instituted under former President Barack Obama’s administration.

A bill put forth by House Republicans was passed out of the House Budget Committee last week and its supporters hope to see it passed before Easter, reports the Associated Press (AP). The bill would repeal the tax penalty for individuals who remain uncovered by insurance and replaces it with a new system of tax credits that, AP says, “is less generous, particularly to older Americans.”

The bill also calls for a gradual end to Medicaid expansion, causing a rift between moderate Republican supporters and conservatives, who would like it to end faster, reports AP. Conservatives also say the bill doesn’t go far enough to undo the effects of the Obama-era law, despite cutting significant taxes, much to the benefit of the wealthy.

The Congressional Budget Office recently reported analysis findings that 24 million Americans would lose health insurance coverage over the next 10 years, but the proposed bill would reduce the federal deficit.

LOCALS CONCERNED

Members of Stand and Resist say they have been calling Rep. Smith’s Washington office frequently to discuss health care coverage concerns, and met with his Howell County liaison Heather Peugh in several settings.

“We asked for a public meeting, but have found that his meetings with local folks are most often closed,” read a statement submitted to the Quill by group member Lois Reborne.
“We want to let Representative Smith know that we are deeply concerned about this piecemeal destruction of the ACA. Repealing it without replacing is just plain irresponsible, especially in vulnerable areas like ours, one of the poorest and most underinsured districts in the U.S,” the statement continued. “As his constituents, we have a right to be heard.”

Members of the group expressed concern about the effects of ACA repeal on area hospitals, the Community Health Center in West Plains and jobs affiliated with the health care profession if consideration is not given to medical facilities in rural settings.

“This bill will affect both our health care and our local economy,” the group asserted.

About 30 people were expected to gather over the course of the day Monday in front of the Howell County Office building, where Smith’s local office is housed, to discuss concerns with the House bill and its proposed changes.

In fact, 52 people turned out, including some “first-timers” who had never protested before, and others for whom it had been many years. They were warmly received, having gotten clearance from city and county officials before the event, and as temperatures soared near 90 degrees after noon, Peugh herself delivered bottled water to the group.

The issues highlighted by Stand and Resist touched on tax cuts for the wealthy that some say will cause higher costs for low-income working people and senior citizens; caps on Medicaid that will reduces needed services for pregnant women, children, disabled citizens and those in nursing homes; the removal of mental health benefits and drug treatment benefits, preventative care and reproductive services and caps on insurance company profits, CEO salaries and profit sharing; the use of tax credits to help economically disadvantaged people pay for insurance; and the promise that the House bill would be followed by unknown, unwritten and likely harder-to-pass new bills to continue dismantling ACA.

**EFFECTS OF PROPOSED CHANGES**

Some at the gathering argued that pushing to keep ACA isn’t enough, and called for support for a single-payer health care system, in which one single public agency pays for health care, as opposed to private insurance companies.

Reborne said in any case, the proposal on the table right now is alarming. She presented research from the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit organization focusing on national health issues and the U.S. role in global health policy. Kaiser aims to serve as a nonpartisan source of facts and analysis for policymakers, the media, the health policy community and the public.

Data compiled by Kaiser included several comparisons between ACA and House Republican proposals. One comparison the agency made was between the projected tax credits under the Affordable Care Act in 2020 and the proposed tax credit under discussion now for the same time frame. Kaiser examined the effects county by county, by age and income levels.
For the 40-year-old Howell County resident bringing home $30,000 per year, if no changes are made by 2020, one could earn $3,770 in tax credits under ACA. If the proposed House plan is put in place, that credit would drop 20 percent to an even $3,000. The average age in Howell County is 40.6 years old, and the average household income – not individual income – is $32,784 according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Looking at the parents of that generation, however, the comparison becomes more stark still. Those age 60 and up with $30,000 annual income would go from a projected $10,790 credit to $4,000, a 63 percent decrease. For lower-income seniors making $20,000 or less, it’s a projected 68 percent drop.

In addition, 17 percent of Missourians currently benefit from Medicaid assistance.

Kaiser reports that if a per capita cap were implemented, as House Republicans have suggested, the federal government would pay states a fixed dollar amount per enrollee annually, depending on the category of each beneficiary, including elderly and disabled people, children and adults who gained coverage under Medicaid expansion, which Missouri and 18 other states did not participate in.

Payments to states would then increase with medical inflation as opposed to the current system in which the federal government covers a percentage of all health care expenses incurred by enrollees, the foundation reports.

“I have huge concerns about the direction of the programs,” said Barbara Modica, West Plains, exercising her activist muscle for “the first time in many years.”

“I just would like everybody to have the best opportunity,” she added.

Bob Colbert, Willow Springs, said he would like elected officials to show more compassion for those at a disadvantage.

“Congressmen and people in government get good insurance,” Colbert said. “Why are they disputing that right for everyone?”

**FINAL IMPRESSIONS**

Modica confided that she hoped that Stand and Resist’s presence on the square would signal to other local citizens with questions about the future of health care that they are not alone.

“We’ve had quite a few people who haven’t done this before,” Reborne told the Quill Monday afternoon. “I’ve had several people say what a relief it is to know there are others who think the same way we do.”

Indeed, one 22-year-old lifelong West Plains resident, who asked that his name be withheld, said that prior to stumbling across the vigil quite by accident, he had no idea there was anyone local who shared his ideals. After taking a closer look at the signs, he grabbed a piece of cardboard and wrote with a marker, “People over money!”
“I just wanted to be with these guys,” he said.

To learn more about Stand and Resist and its goals, visit “Stand and Resist: Howell County” on Facebook.