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StL Jewish Community Turns Out to Challenge Legislators on Affordable Care Act

Some 200 supporters urge state representatives to implement health care reform in Missouri.

Nearly 200 St. Louis area residents turned out Sunday afternoon for a public meeting on health reform at Congregation Shaare Emeth. The purpose of the meeting was tell their state legislators that they support the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) and urge lawmakers to work toward the establishment of insurance exchanges and rate review in Missouri.

One day before the U.S. Supreme Court begins to hear oral arguments on court cases challenging provisions of the ACA, 16 organizations invited 34 state legislators to listen to stories from their constituents illustrating why health reform is needed in Missouri. Nine legislators, eight Democrats and one Independent, attended the event.



(Photo by Yana Hotter, Spoonful of Sugar Photography.)

The Jewish community played a significant role in the event. The planning effort was initiated by Central Reform Congregation (CRC) and Congregation Shaare Emeth, and three other Jewish organizations cosponsored the event – the Jewish Community Relations Council, Jewish Family and Children’s Service, and the National Council of Jewish Women-St. Louis Section. Three of the participating legislators were members of the Jewish community – Representatives Susan Carlson and Stacey Newman are members of CRC and Representative Jill Schupp is a member of Congregation Shaare Emeth. More than 50 attendees self-identified on sign-in forms as members of Jewish communal organizations and congregations.

“Since the passage of the ACA, we have seen attacks on the law and efforts to roll back its provisions, or simply ignore them,” said Julie Terbrock, program director of Missouri ProVote. “In many ways, Missouri has led the way in turning the ACA from a program to better our lives into an election wedge issue. We are seeing politicians stand in the way of critical reform in an effort to secure a few more votes.”

Four speakers addressed the need to establish a Missouri health insurance exchange, where uninsured residents could compare policy benefits and shop for coverage to meet their individual needs.

“The ACA says that either a state can set up its own exchange by 2014, or the Federal government will do it for them. Missouri is going to have an exchange one way or another, and we should be getting ready to integrate our existing health care programs with the new system,” said Megan Burke, a leader of Paraquad and the Disability Coalition on Health Care Reform. “Instead, our General Assembly has been embroiled in politics, which is very frustrating to watch.”

State Representative Jill Schupp of Creve Coeur echoed this frustration, as she described how members of the Missouri House voted to reject a \$50 million grant from the Federal government because they feared it would be used to help establish an insurance exchange. The grant could have been used to modernize Missouri’s existing health care systems.

Also calling for the implementation of a state insurance exchange were Central Reform Congregation member Leslie Caplan, a freelance musician who has had no health insurance since 2005 because she has a pre-existing condition; Erica Douglas, whose father, Robert, died at age 59 after he could not afford to pay the premiums on his former company insurance plan; and the Rev. Mark Harvey, pastor of Harmony United Method Church in Overland, who described how many churches with limited finances are forced to hire part-time lay pastors rather than full-time clergy to avoid the cost of health insurance.

“I’m tired of being a poster child for the uninsured in Missouri,” Caplan said. “Health insurance is a right. It’s not a privilege.”

Speakers also addressed the high cost of health insurance in Missouri and the need for insurance rate review as one way to help control costs.

“The cost of health insurance in Missouri grew 83 percent between 2000 and 2009, while median earnings grew only 23 percent,” said Farilyn Hale, president of the St. Louis Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. “In the same time period, profits for the 10 largest insurance companies increased 250 percent. Missouri doesn’t even require health insurers to file their rate increases with the state. Only two other states have so little transparency.”

Chesterfield resident Sue Bohm described paying insurance premiums totaling more than \$76,000 in four years for a “mostly healthy family of four,” and Bernadette Gronborg of Festus called for increased authority for the state so that consumers and small businesses purchasing health insurance would have transparency to assure a competitive marketplace and the ability to approve proposed rate hikes before they go into effect.

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The insurance industry is a huge presence in Jefferson City, according to State Representative Tracy McCreery of Olivette.

"Money is flowing all over the place," she said. "It's all about the money, and not about the people."

The meeting concluded with a call by Central Reform Congregation member Sharon Hollander, who urged legislators to champion health reform in Missouri by including information about the ACA in their communications to their constituents, by working with activists and progressives on health reform, and by making health care one of their top priorities.

"We need you to know and understand what is at stake," Terbrock told the lawmakers. "And we need you to partner with us on making the promise of the ACA a reality in Missouri."

Legislators who attended the event were Senators Joseph Keaveny, Robin Wright-Jones and Maria Chappelle-Nadal, and Representatives Jeanette Mott Oxford, Susan Carlson, Rory Ellinger, Stacey Newman, Jill Schupp and Tracy McCreery.

Sponsoring organizations were Central Reform Congregation, Congregation Shaare Emeth, the Disability Coalition on Healthcare Reform, Eden Theological Seminary, First Unitarian Church Social Responsibility Committee, Jewish Community Relations Council, Jewish Family and Children's Service, Lutheran Family and Children's Services, the Missouri Alliance of Retired Americans Education Fund, Missouri Citizen Education Fund, Missouri Health Care for All, Missouri Interfaith IMPACT, Missouri Jobs with Justice, the National Council of Jewish Women-St. Louis Section, Peace with Justice office of the United Methodist Church, and Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice.

After three days of oral argument, the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule on certain aspects of the ACA in June.



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