

## A brief history of Mass-Care

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Mass-Care Vice-chair

Readers of *The Massachusetts Nurse Advocate* have seen frequent references to Mass-Care. MNA has been involved with this statewide coalition for fundamental healthcare reform since its inception in 1995. Here are some highlights of this exciting 13-year history.

The Massachusetts Campaign for Single Payer Health Care grew out of a statewide battery of local non-binding ballot questions in November 1994. These questions urged legislators to support bills to create a publicly-funded, universal, portable, comprehensive healthcare system for the commonwealth. A solid majority of voters in eight communities spread across the state affirmed the need for real change. Even though there had been such ballot initiatives in the past—and indeed single-payer bills filed—this time an organizational structure was in place to keep the momentum going.

Jobs with Justice is a national labor-community coalition working for workers' rights and economic justice. The Massachusetts chapter had a functioning healthcare action committee, which had been engaged for several years in lobbying for progressive legislation on the state and national levels, as well as in rallying the troops for such demonstrative action as encircling the John Hancock tower in Boston with red tape, symbolizing the wasteful overhead of commercial health insurance. Meeting in the South Boston offices of UE Local 262, Jobs with Justice resolved to pull together the local and statewide organizations that had been working on the ballot questions in order to form a broad and powerful movement for healthcare justice. The JwJ committee then disbanded.

Since MNA had resolved at its 1994 business meeting to endorse the single-payer ballot initiative, it became involved in Mass-Care right from the beginning. Several years ago, Jobs with Justice reconstituted its healthcare action committee in order to draw more of organized labor into the healthcare fray. Coming full circle, this JwJ committee now meets monthly in the Chinatown office of Mass-Care and is considered its Boston chapter.

Mass-Care constituted itself as a coalition of organizations which support the single-payer solution to the access-affordability-quality crisis in health care. It established a coordinating committee, made up of representatives of each of its participating organizations, meeting monthly in a central location, usually Worcester, to decide on direction and policy. An advisory board, recently enlarged and

enlivened, brings the weight of expertise and political savvy to Mass-Care. The Universal Health Care Education Fund was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) to stimulate education and research.

Since 1996, Mass-Care has filed legislation to create the Massachusetts Health Care Trust each biennial session. With each refiling, the language has been sharpened. Sen. Bob Travaglini and Rep. John Stefanini had been lead sponsors of Mass-Care's bill in earlier years. Sen. Steve Tolman and Rep. Frank Hynes have led the way in recent sessions. Although the bill has yet to come out of committee, single-payer activists have had the opportunity to press forward on educational work and research.

Two independent studies commissioned by the Massachusetts Medical Society and funded by the Senate Ways & Means Committee in 1999—one by Solutions for Progress, the other by the Lewin Group—have shown that a single-payer system in Massachusetts would cover everyone and save money. Parallel initiatives around Question 5 on the 2000 Massachusetts ballot and the subsequent constitutional amendment campaign have produced studies that reached the same conclusion.

For 10 years now we've held an annual celebration of the contributions of one of our early champions, the late psychiatrist Benjamin Gill. This affords us the opportunity to honor living champions, to come together to explore burning issues, and to solidify our movement.

What do we now have to show for all this work? Currently, more than 100 organizations have come forward to endorse the bill and the campaign, from such large membership organizations as the Massachusetts Teachers Association to town committees. The League of Women Voters, the Massachusetts Senior Action Council and, of course, the Massachusetts Nurses Association, are among the most active. A score of municipalities have resolved to support single payer, including the city councils of Northampton and Boston. Organized chapters of Mass-Care exist from the Berkshires to Cape Cod.

Nothing beats solid grassroots organizing, and nothing of consequence will succeed without it. As the inadequacies of the market-based approach to health care reveal themselves in more and more medical bankruptcies, premature deaths and denial of care, the single-payer approach, with healthcare seen as a right and not a commodity, will come to the fore as the only rational and humane step forward.

To contact Mass-Care, call 617-723-7001 or go to its Web site, [www.masscare.org](http://www.masscare.org). ■

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