

Fight for a just health care system ongoing at state, federal levels



A supporter at a rally in Peabody Square.



Ann Eldridge Malone, RN, at a rally in Kenmore Square.



By Sandy Eaton, RN

Shortly after returning from last December's founding convention of the National Nurses United, Karen Higgins, NNU co-president and former MNA president, was being interviewed by a Lowell radio station. Seemingly out of the blue she was asked what the NNU thought about the health care plan unfolding in Washington. Her response? "Why try to reinvent the wheel when we have models in the U.S. that are proven to work, like Medicare and the VA system?"

Despite all of the local and national commotion in recent years regarding health care reform, we still need to transcend the status quo and free ourselves from the clutches of commercial health insurance companies and HMOs. Access, affordability, quality and equality are the four pillars of a just health care system. This system must also include enforceable staffing standards.

The big news locally is the presence of the non-binding "Health Care as a Human Right Question" on the ballot in 14 state representative districts across the commonwealth on Nov. 2 in communities from Becket to Braintree. We have just received word from the secretary of state's office that the question will be listed as Question 4 in all these areas, with the exception of Marlborough, Sunderland and Whately, where it will be Question 5. This initiative was launched by the Massachusetts Campaign for Healthcare Justice, a joint project of Jobs with Justice and the Massachusetts Campaign for Single Payer Health Care (Mass-Care).

Strong movements for fundamental reform are now active in many states, with Vermont and Maine among the most advanced.

For a number of years H.R.676, the Medicare for All bill sponsored by U.S. Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), has been the focal point of work at the national level. H.R.676 won the endorsement of over 500 labor organizations, including 37 state labor federations. Locally, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, half of the commonwealth's central labor councils, the MNA and many other individual unions endorsed this approach.

The work of the All Unions Committee, which spearheaded the

movement to support H.R.676, was fortified in January 2009 with the founding of the Labor Campaign for Single Payer, bringing together labor leaders and activists from across the country.

Thanks to the hard work of the All Unions Committee and the Labor Campaign, more resolutions supporting the single-payer approach were submitted to the AFL-CIO resolutions committee than resolutions on any other issue in the history of the federation. This led to the unanimous passage at the September 2009 AFL-CIO convention of Resolution 34, The Social Insurance Model for Health Care Reform. Resolution 34 states, "The experience of Medicare (and of nearly every other industrialized country) shows the most cost-effective and equitable way to provide quality health care is through a single-payer system. Our nation should provide a single, high standard of comprehensive care for all." This corresponds to the MNA's ethical imperative to "work for the improvement and availability of health care services for all people."

The Labor Campaign for Single Payer is guided by a 35-member steering committee that includes NNU co-president, Jean Ross; NNU treasurer, Martha Kuhl; and NNU legislative council chair, Sandy Eaton. What happens on Nov. 2 is important for everyone.

Those candidates who support fundamental health care reform, including enforceable staffing standards, need to be elected or re-elected. Please support the candidates endorsed by Mass Nurses PAC, and please support the local coalitions backing the health care ballot question. ■

Contact Mass-Care at 617-723-7001 or at masscare.org to get involved in this valuable work.