

Nurses' guide to single-payer reform

State House flooded with "health care trust" supporters

By Sandy Eaton, RN

On July 20, more than 40 legislators, local officials, group representatives and private individuals testified before the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing at the State House on behalf of S.755, An Act to Establish the Massachusetts Health Care Trust.

Thanks to these people, and to the many others who sent in written testimony or came to bear witness to the growing strength of the movement for health care justice, we are closer to our goal of providing universal access to quality, affordable health care to all Massachusetts residents via a constitutional amendment.

Sparked by the phenomenal support for such an amendment, several other health care expansion bills have been filed in the current legislative session, none of which actually come close to attaining universal coverage. Only a publicly-financed, universal single-payer system—like S.755 (Tolman/Hynes)—will create a system of health care that is uniformly affordable to individuals, families, towns and society. We urge you to carefully compare these new proposals to S.755.

Outlined below is the testimony that was offered by two supporters who participated in the July 20 hearing: Julie Pinkham, RN, MNA executive director, and Ron Patenaude, president of UAW Local 2322.

MNA testimony

Good morning, my name is Julie Pinkham. I'm the executive director of the Massachusetts Nurses Association and I am here to offer testimony in support of the Massachusetts Health Care Trust Bill.

The MNA represents more than 23,000 registered nurses and health care professionals working in 85 Massachusetts health care facilities including hospitals, VNAs, schools, long-term care facilities, clinics and public health departments. Our members work on the front-lines of the health care system, providing a real understanding of how the system works and, more importantly, given recent developments, how the system fails to work on behalf of patients and communities of the commonwealth.

From the perspective of nurses who work on the front-lines and spend more time with patients and their families than any other provider group, the Massachusetts health care system has failed: depriving care to those who need services and delivering inadequate to unsafe care to those who do achieve access.

A June 2005 survey of Massachusetts nurses found that 62 percent believe that the health care system in Massachusetts has real problems and is in need of a major overhaul.

The MNA has long been a supporter of a single-payer health care system and, as such, is a strong supporter of the Massachusetts Health Care Trust Bill. There are two core principles that underpin and have guided our positions on this issue. They are:

1. We believe that universal access to quality health care is a basic human right of every member of our society and that the inability to guarantee

that right is evidence of a failure of our society that must be addressed. We believe the health care system in our state is in serious crisis and in need of dramatic and comprehensive reform in order to secure the right of access to health care for all.

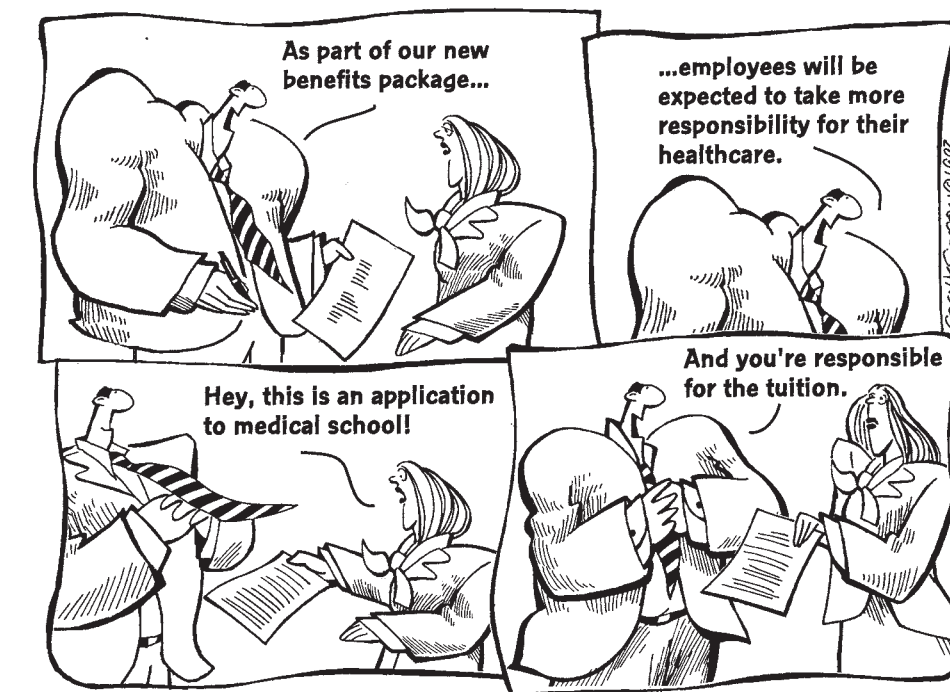
2. We believe the free-market, de-regulated and corporatized approach to the delivery of health care in the commonwealth is an abject failure, and it is the primary cause of the crisis we now face.

We have seen too many patients go without appropriate preventive care, delayed treatment and end up crowding already overcrowded emergency rooms because they lack health insurance or are under-insured, thereby costing themselves their health and sometimes their lives, not to mention driving up the cost of treating all patients in the current dysfunctional system.

We have watched patients be denied appropriate care, watched patients get pushed out of appropriate care settings and, yes, we have watched patients suffer and die because no one in this system wants to be fully accountable for providing the basic human right of decent health care.

This year, the issue of how to fix this broken system has thankfully taken center stage. Numerous proposals, including those by Senator Moore, Senator Travaglini and Governor Romney are on the table right now.

In short, from a nurse's perspective, the current multi-payer, market-driven system of health care financing is inefficient, ineffective and unredeemable. In its place we support and endorse a system as envisioned under the Massachusetts Health Care Trust Bill, which would guarantee every Massa-



chusetts resident health care coverage by replacing the current patchwork of public and private health care plans with a uniform and comprehensive health plan.

It is clear to the nurses of Massachusetts that our health care system is broken and in need of a complete and drastic overhaul. Without a commitment to the provision of health care as a basic human right for all; without a complete revamping of how we finance and administer health care to ensure that we provide this right to all of our citizens; and without a system of regulations to ensure that patients receive the attention and

care they require to recover from illness and injury, thousands of our citizens will suffer and many will die.

The MNA, and the thousands of nurses and health professionals we represent, call upon the Legislature to join with us in seeing that we end this crisis and create a health care system that works for the betterment of our society.

Those interested in creating a just health care system should stand up and be heard! For more information, go to the MASS-CARE Web site at www.masscare.org or call the MASS-CARE office at 800-383-1983. ■

The United Auto Workers and S.755

President's testimony on behalf of single-payer health care

My name is Ron Patenaude and I am here as the president of the United Auto Workers, Local 2322. I'd like to thank the legislators for holding this hearing on the single-payer health care bill, S.755, as well as all of our brothers and sisters who have come out to support this piece of legislation.

We are an amalgamated local representing over 3,500 members mainly in the fields of human service and higher education, and I have to say that health care has become one of the most difficult issues for us to deal with in terms of negotiations. And as almost anyone will tell you, this issue is causing the economy to stagnate; it is killing job creation; and it is costing the taxpayers of the commonwealth—as well as the entire country—immensely.

Those of us in the labor movement have a tradition of calling each other "brother and sister" and it is born out of the recognition that we are all in this struggle together. We have a social contract with each other and, even though we are not related through blood, we are in our shared fight to better the lives of our families and fellow members of society.

I think this holds true when we're talking about our desire to see all citizens receive the benefits that this bill would deliver. The UAW—both locally, regionally and internationally—has endorsed universal health care and believe it is a right and should not be a privilege.

There is a lot of talk about how a universal system would cause the "rationing" of health care. If anyone thinks that is not already happening under the current hodgepodge of a system then I suggest you look again. I am speaking today not just as a union representa-

tive, but as a former health care worker and I think the deregulation of the hospital "industry"—and trust me, it is an industry—some years back has helped create and exasperate the current morass that exists today.

There is no reason to have hospitals and insurance companies spending the kind of money they do on advertising, consultants and layer upon layer of management only to have no money to spare to hire, train and retain the direct care staff that does the actual work.

I can not tell you how frustrating it was last week at the hearing on the MNA's safe staffing bill to hear overpaid hospital administrators, who usually have no medical training whatsoever, dismiss the experiences, opinions and statistics of the nurses who actually do the work in the hospitals. Health care should not be market driven, and competition has done nothing to lower costs. In fact it has made a mockery of the term "non-profit corporation."

I urge you to do the right thing and work to pass this bill, not to waste time on incremental bills that only add to the costs and profits of existing systems. Every day, every month and every year that goes by without action only adds to those costs.

Finally, as someone of Canadian heritage, I have to tell you that I've never heard my relatives there complain about the services they have received under their system. So please don't be swayed by the rhetoric of those who would like to maintain the status quo in Massachusetts. We spend far more per capita than they do, which should indicate that single-payer health care should have a fine prognosis in the commonwealth. ■