

Hopkins Dean Joins List of Supporters for Maryland Universal Health Care Bill

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BALTIMORE - The dean of the Johns Hopkins school of public health endorsed a state bill Wednesday that would force businesses to either offer health insurance to their employees or pay toward a fund for the uninsured.

Bloomberg School of Public Health Dean Alfred Sommer said later that it was the first time he has ever endorsed a universal health care bill.

"It is extraordinarily embarrassing for me, personally, to go to almost any meeting in the world where there are people from other developed market economies, because we are the only country which does not guarantee access to health care," he said.

Sommer joins a long list of supporters of the bill, which is expected to be filed in the General Assembly within the next few days. But the proposal has strong opponents as well, including the Maryland Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber, whose 900 members employ 340,000 Marylanders, said that forcing businesses to participate in health care coverage could cost them more than \$500 million, which would lead to the loss of thousands of jobs.

"They (backers) have done a good job of raising grassroots support," said chamber spokesman Ronald W. Wineholt. "I think the reason it has not passed is because there are questions with the plan."

A better solution, Wineholt said, is lowering the cost of health care by going after fraud and abuse, making it more affordable for businesses to join health care groups and reforming the medical malpractice system.

"We think the solution is trying to find a way to make health insurance more affordable. If you find ways to reduce cost, that is better for the insured and the uninsured," Wineholt said.

House and Senate bills should be filed in the next couple of days, said Vincent DeMarco, president of Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative, the group behind the proposal.

DeMarco's group said the bill would charge a 4.5 percent tax on the payroll of businesses with fewer than 10,000 employees that do not offer health insurance, and an 8 percent tax on such businesses if they have more than 10,000 employees. The bill would also raise the tax on cigarettes by 50 cents a pack.

The Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative estimates that 25 percent of state businesses do not offer their employees health insurance.

"Because of how we pay for health care in this state, it's not fair -- if you are an employer who gives health care to your employees that you are unfairly subsidizing those who aren't," said Glenn Schneider, executive director of the Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative. "In

reality you're picking up the slack of those who aren't doing anything."

The bill also calls for expansions of the state's Medicaid and Medicare programs and expansion of the small-group insurance plan. It would also create a program to offer health care to the 4 percent of the population that would not be covered by expanding current health plans.

The bill has won support from groups like the American Cancer Society, the Baltimore Jewish Council and the American Medical Student Association, 17 members of which were present at Wednesday's news conference with Sommer.

Katherine Conner, a second-year medical student, said she plans to testify to the Maryland Senate Finance Committee on the bill Feb. 25.

"In order for us to effectively work to promote the health of our future patients and our communities, we have to ensure that they are no longer excluded from accessing quality, affordable comprehensive health care," said Conner, who represented the University of Maryland AMSA chapter in Baltimore.

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