

My name is Al Ormsby. I am a member of NYS Citizen Action and I serve on the Capital District Board. Citizen Action is one of many organizations affiliated with Health Care for America Now {HCAN}. HCAN is a strong supporter of the Affordable Health Care for America Act as well as an advocate for its expeditious implementation.

In the spring of 2009 I became a HCAN volunteer. Almost every HCAN volunteer was motivated to work for health care reform because they had personally witnessed the tragedy that is endemic to our healthcare system.

In this vein I would like to reveal my experience. I worked in the Social Security Disability program for nearly 30 years. Since many disability claimants lacked health insurance they were without a treating physician who could submit current medical evidence. Therefore we had to pay for a consultative medical examination to obtain the recent information that Social Security required. Since an exam could reveal an unexpected medical condition that called for urgent intervention the claimant was asked to pre-sign a waiver allowing us to release this information to a pre-designated physician. We had to contact the claimant and explain the importance of seeking treatment in cases where newly discovered findings required immediate attention and a physician hadn't been designated.

What occurred in these situations will always remain with me. All the people were ill and needed immediate medical assistance. They were mostly Title II [i.e. regular] disability claimants that had too much to qualify for SSI but had too little to afford health insurance. For most non SSI claimants health insurance doesn't immediately kick in when approved for disability.

There is one person's story that I think speaks for many others. A lesion was discovered on a routine chest x-ray. The claimant had no insurance and no treating physician that we could notify. Since there was a high probability that the lesion was malignant, urgent medical follow-up was required. Following our advice the claimant sought medical treatment the way that many in her position do; she went to the ER. She was told that an x-ray finding didn't warrant emergency treatment and they suggested that she make an appointment with a non emergency physician to follow up on this. We tried to encourage her to continue to seek treatment, but I doubt that she did. She struck me as a person who saw herself as middle class and was ashamed of her present financial situation. Trying to force a bureaucracy to service you against its will is tough enough when you feel well. We did our job of informing her of the potential urgency of her situation. It was now supposedly up to her.

Based on my experience I doubt that many people in her predicament got the needed care. I am certain that many potential life saving findings failed to result in appropriate medical treatment and eventually wound up filed away.

Yes, there is a reason why our country and state have less favorable medical outcomes than most of the other industrialized states of the world. We can't ignore the fact that we have a health care system that has too many people falling between the cracks. That's why it's so imperative that we begin the process of setting up the exchanges mandated by the Affordable Health Care for America Act as soon as possible.

While this new law isn't perfect it does afford states considerable leeway in setting up the exchanges. New York State has an opportunity to once again set the bar by which all other states are measured. This means taking the lead in establishing exchanges that have the highest standards in the nation. I refer to standards that offer the greatest number of New Yorkers protection while insuring the most comprehensive coverage. Comprehensive coverage is important because no one knows what kind of medical care they may require tomorrow.

Let's face it, if New York is to live up to its proud tradition of leadership it's not going to do so by competing with states like South Carolina for first prize in the "mad rush to the bottom" sweepstakes. That has never been our pathway to being number 1 and it shouldn't be today.

The urgency of moving forward with health care reform is best expressed by paraphrasing a great American. Speaking on behalf of civil rights, Hubert Humphrey once said; some people say that we are moving too fast, I say that we are a hundred years too late.