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Meeting promotes healthcare option — Crowd urged to contact representatives in support of Obama's plan

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Local State Democratic legislators and area residents spoke Thursday night at a 7th Senatorial District Town Hall meeting in Henderson.

The session promoted President Barack Obama's proposed public healthcare option that is being debated in Congress.

"We need to weigh in on those folks in Washington and tell them what we want," the guest speaker, Adam Searing, told possibly 150 people.

He is project director of the North Carolina Justice Center's Health Access Coalition. The non-profit organization is headquartered in Raleigh.

His listeners filled up all the wooden benches, stood along the walls and sat in the Vance County Commissioners' official seats in the rear of the conference room in the old court house on Young Street.

The crowd consisted of citizens, civic leaders and public officials in Vance, Warren, Granville, Franklin and Person counties.

The host, Senator Doug Berger, was joined by House Representatives Jim Crawford, Michael Wray and Lucy Allen.

Other speakers included:

- Mary Somerville, co-executive director of the Warren County Free Clinic. She said it has served more than 1,500 patients in the last six months at a cost less than \$100,000.
- William Massengill, chief operating officer for Wake Health Services. He talked about the work done by Franklin Community Health Services, which has been in Louisburg for a year. "It's amazing to see the depth of health care problems that people present."
- Ann (no last name given), a retired registered nurse who works for Volunteers In Medicine. It has served

the insured and under-insured in Franklin County for five years. She came from Canada, which has free health care.

Several people shared personal stories about how their lives had been impacted by the current health care system.

Berger wanted to hear "how we can effectively advocate for (the) U.S. Congress to expand health care coverage."

The coalition that Searing has led since 1997 advocates health care reforms that address the needs of the uninsured and the under-insured.

It seeks more comprehensive and effective public health care programs on behalf of average consumers in the private market.

He has held health care public forums in Boone, Garner, Greensboro, Morganton and Wilmington, as well as other towns and cities in the State.

The director said 1.8 million people are uninsured in North Carolina, which has the highest rate of growth in the nation.

According to Searing, it is directly tied to the State's 11 percent-plus unemployment.

"Lose your job, lose your health insurance. Get sick and can't work? Lose your health insurance."

Then he brought up the question that is frustrating Congress.

"How the heck are we going to control (health care) costs?," Searing asked everyone there.

"This is the most contentious part of the whole debate in Washington right now," he said.

Searing mentioned that a lot of people who now make a lot of cash from the current situation are going to get mad during the process of change.

"You can't save money without taking it away from somebody," he explained. "Pharmaceutical companies are spending \$1.5 million a day in Washington lobbying on this issue."

The current bills under consideration in the Senate and the House provide an excellent framework for how to reform the country's health by expanding coverage, containing costs and improving care, according to Searing.

Both bills expand coverage for the poorest citizens through Medicaid, he added.

Searing said each proposal also offers substantial tax credits for small businesses and individuals to help

them to buy coverage.

The two measures under scrutiny would provide a menu of private health plans to choose from in every state. Basic benefits are defined.

Each has a public option health plan that could be chosen, and cannot be taken away.

They do not allow any public or private plan to have higher rates or deny insurance on the basis of pre-existing conditions.

The proposals would keep some discipline in the system on insurers.

Each of the two bills under consideration compares the effectiveness of treatments and drugs. Physicians would be paid for the outcome of care, and not for each procedure.

Searing said a strong state consumer agency is needed — like the N.C. Attorney General's Managed Care Patient Assistance Program — to help guide people to the plans that are right for them.

Blue Cross-Blue Shield — which has 97 percent of the individual market and 73 percent of the overall insurance market in North Carolina — could use a little competition, Searing said.

He informed the group that the company's CEO got a \$760,000 raise, and was paid \$4 million last year as the head of a non-profit.

"We need another option," Searing told the audience.

Health care costs are out of control, he said. "They have doubled in the last 10 years, and are expected to do the same without change over the next 10."

Searing encouraged people to call their representatives in Congress toll free at 1-800- 828-0498 and ask them to support health reform.

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