



COUNTDOWN

Volume 2 Issue 1

www.americasagenda.org

Winter 2006

Advances Made in America's Agenda Pilot States

Mark Your Calendars!

March 29th
Heroes of
Health Care
Dinner

...page 2

Illinois: A Beacon of Hope

Illinois's Health Care Justice Act – co-sponsored by then-state Senator Barack Obama, and signed into law by Governor Rod Blagojevich in 2003 – calls on the Illinois General Assembly to enact a universal health care plan by December 31, 2006 and to implement it by July 1, 2007.

Then in the summer of 2005, Illinois adopted the most far-reaching plan of any state in the country to assure affordable health insurance to every child in the state. Now, as Illinois holds town-hall style hearings on its next steps toward universal coverage, the state is sending

...continues on p. 4

Maine: Dirigo Health Saves State Nearly \$44 Million

Governor Announces Major Expansion of Dirigo Coverage

Dirigo works! The Maine Superintendent of Insurance Alessandro Iuppa ruled, after an extensive adjudicatory hearing, that Dirigo Health – the program designed to assure affordable, high quality health care to every Mainer – has resulted in \$43.7 million in savings in its first year.



Mainers for Health Care and allies protest insurance industry efforts to sabotage funding of Dirigo Health.

...continues on p. 5

Vermont: Universal Health Care Campaign Finds its Legs

Vermont's statewide campaign for universal health care is moving forward.

Vermont's statewide campaign for universal health care is moving forward.

veloping a plan to assure that every Vermont resident could have access to affordable, high quality care.

Last year, Coalition 21, an independent forum of respected state leaders from government, labor, business, and the health care sector, reached consensus over a set of simple, straightforward principles to guide their state in de-

When the House Committee on Health Care met to draft the state's universal health care bill, they tacked the six Coalition 21 principles on their wall as a constant reminder of the

...continues on p. 6

Massachusetts Health Care Reform Presses Forward

The drive toward health care reform for Massachusetts is advancing on several tracks during the current legislative session, but the goal of affordable, comprehensive coverage has yet to be reached.

House bill seeks to cover 95% of the uninsured over two years and relies on both a payroll tax and individual mandates. The Senate bill, by contrast, includes neither and is projected to cover a more modest 50% of the state's uninsured.

Both the House and the Senate have passed bills that would expand health care coverage, but the bills represent significantly different approaches. The

These differences, plus varying approaches to expansion of Medicaid and a host of other issues, have been sent to a joint conference com-

...continues on p. 5

Working State by State to Win Health Care Coverage for All

State

U P D A T E

Wisconsin Health Plan 'a Work in Progress'

David Riemer and Lisa Ellinger, two former aides to Governor Jim Doyle, have developed a bipartisan health proposal to address both "the skyrocketing cost of health care" and the increasing numbers of uninsured.

It would create a \$13.5 billion-a-year plan that would guarantee coverage for all Wisconsinites by requiring all Wisconsin employers to pay into a health insurance purchasing pool. The pool would be run by a private nonprofit corporation along lines similar to those used to manage the state's unemployment and workers' compensation funds.

The plan has drawn bipartisan support from an often-divided Legislature.

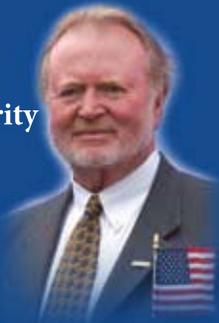
...continues on p. 6

IN THIS ISSUE

President's Message.....	2
Heroes of Health Care Dinner.....	2
Salute to MD Activists.....	3
Illinois Labor Leaders.....	4
NYC Health Care Security Act.....	7
Kentucky AFL-CIO Endorses Bill.....	7
Public Support of Universal Health Care...8	

President's Message

Doug Dority
President,
America's
Agenda



America's Agenda: Building on a Good First Year

We've had a year to test a theory we felt pretty sure about when we launched America's Agenda: that the battle to win affordable health care for all Americans would not be won first on Capitol Hill, but in the states. Our objective was to select states that had the strongest political prospects for victory, and give them the critical campaign tools they need to win

As we complete our first program year, we can report exciting progress. Our theory that progress toward real reform would advance first in the states appears to be right on the mark.

The more the President and Congress evade and footdrag on a federal solution to the health care crisis, the more determined activists at the state level are to reform a health care system that adversely impacts living standards, job creation, wage growth and economic competitiveness for American industry in a global economy. Today viable universal health care campaigns are underway in four states—and America's Agenda has been instrumental in each.

In this issue of Countdown you'll learn how:

- America's Agenda is partnering with Illinois unions and the Campaign for Better Health Care (CBHC) to educate the public and build a grassroots universal health care campaign in communities throughout the state. We are working to assure that labor's voice is heard in public hearings being held in every Congressional District and represented in the drafting of a universal health care bill that is headed to the legislature by December 2006.
- We've helped reshape the Vermont debate over universal health care and revitalize a citizens' campaign to win it. We and our campaign partners are working

...continues on p. 3



Dinner to Honor 'Health Heroes'

Join America's Agenda Wednesday March 29
in Honoring the Heroes of Health Care!

This year's honorees are:



Governor Rod Blagojevich signed the historic Health Care Justice Act with a goal of assuring health care to every resident of Illinois. He has expanded health care coverage and increased state funding by \$1 billion, telling his constituents: "To me, health care is more than a privilege, it's a right."



UFCW President Joseph Hansen declared: "No union, no one company, has a solution to the health care crisis. It's a national crisis--and it requires a political solution." President Hansen is one of our country's foremost leaders in the effort to secure health care for all Americans.



The Maine AFL-CIO has been the rock to lean on for health care advocates who continue to beat back attempts by entrenched special interests to derail health care for all Mainers.

This gala event is a celebration of remarkable leaders - heroes from diverse walks of life whose vision and courage lead the way to a great goal: health security for ALL.

Heroes of Health Care Dinner
Wednesday March 29, 2006
Capital Hilton Hotel
6:00 pm
Dress: Business Casual

Tickets and ad space are still available!

Please contact Christina Erling at **800-546-5596** or at **cerling@americasagenda.org** for further information and sponsorship opportunities!

Salute to the Fighters for Maryland's Fair Share Health Care Law

America's Agenda salutes UFCW, SEIU, allied organizations, responsible business owners, and tens of thousands of Marylanders who fought so hard to win the Maryland's historic Fair Share Health Care Law.

We salute the Maryland legislators who had the courage and decency to stand with the working families of Maryland, rather than with the political money and lobbying muscle of Wal-Mart.

The Maryland Fair Share Health Care Act, which requires Maryland mega-employers to spend at least 8% of payroll for employee health care, was vetoed last year by Republican Governor Robert Ehrlich. The campaign ramped up to win resounding veto override votes in both the State Senate and the House when the 2006 legislative session began in January

With the veto override, Maryland became the first state in the nation to enact fair share health care legislation. Eyes across the country watched with great interest as the Maryland battle unfolded. Following the victory, similar legislation is being introduced in 30 more states.

The Maryland victory is an important step forward in the march toward winning affordable, high quality health care for every American. This victory underscores an important lesson in the struggle for health care reform: the most direct route to winning affordable health care for every American runs through the state capitals. By winning universal health care campaigns state by state, we will build the momentum needed to win affordable health care, finally, for all Americans.

Check out Citizens Health Care Working Group Today!



www.uncw.org/uncw_4_healthcare/citizens_health_care_group/index.cfm

America's Agenda: Building on a Good First Year

continued from p. 2

directly with state legislators to craft and pass promising new health care reform legislation, despite the veto of a universal health care bill last year by a governor with close ties to the health insurance industry.

- We are working with the governor and state labor unions in Maine to expand the state's Dirigo Health Plan from an insurance option that has been available mainly to small businesses and low-income families into a major cost-containing force that will benefit all Maine working families and be a cornerstone of Maine's strategy to stimulate economic growth and create good jobs.
- America's Agenda is providing support to dozens of Massachusetts unions and strategic partners in the fight to win a state universal health care constitutional amendment. At the same time, we are supporting efforts to win the most aggressive possible expansion of health care coverage in a state health care reform bill pending, now, in the Massachusetts legislature.

Over the long-term, the staggering rise in health insurance costs cannot be contained unless coverage is extended to all. During the past year, America's Agenda arranged for respected health economist Ken Thorpe, who is one of our strategic partners, to advise campaign staffs, members of the media, state officials, and legislative leaders in three of our four pilot campaign states.

In Maine, Dr. Thorpe's analysis proved that expansion of health coverage during the first year of operation of Maine's Dirigo Health program generated at least \$43.7 million in savings for the state.

In Massachusetts, his analysis revealed that, regardless of whether legislators enacted expansion of the employment-based health insurance or opted for a publicly-financed system, universal coverage will result in enormous savings to business, individuals and government. The most costly public policy option by far is to do nothing!

From the beginning, our mission has been to build momentum toward affordable health care for all Americans by first winning universal health care campaigns state by state. There are encouraging indications that momentum is building in our favor. In a recent Vermont AARP poll found that 70% responded that leg-

islators who support statewide universal health care would win their vote in the next election. Respected pollster Celinda Lake finds similar voter attitudes emerging across the country.

That should send a message about the potency of health care as a campaign issue for candidates running for office in 2006 and 2008, whether for the state house or the White House. It isn't just the 46 million uninsured in this country who despair over the current system—polls show there is a growing anxiety over health insurance costs among all voters.

While it has been a good first year for America's Agenda, we can't falter now. Events taking shape in 2006 are critical. A constitutional amendment to mandate affordable, high quality health care is headed toward a November ballot in Massachusetts.

The 2006 legislative session already underway in Vermont will test whether a popular Republican governor can continue to hold back genuine health care reform.

Entrenched interests are targeting pro-health care reform governors and legislators in the 2006 midterm elections. In each of these states, we face formidable opposition from the for-profit health insurance industry, anti-union businesses, and right-wing organizations willing to spend whatever it takes to protect their lucrative status quo.

A major challenge for us in 2006 will be to bring union employers with us into the fight. One good place to begin is the auto industry where workers and employers are at a competitive disadvantage with foreign auto makers. When the UAW recently agreed to take \$1 billion per year in health care concessions, GM pledged "an unprecedented effort to improve affordability, accessibility, and accountability of the U.S. health care system, including pursuit of universal coverage."

Let's take them up on it.

Every responsible employer should become an ally in this struggle. But it won't happen without leadership from labor. Over 2006, America's Agenda is launching a drive to recruit union employers to the fight, and we'll need your help. This is a fight that, together, we can win. And when we do, labor and union employers will all benefit.

Illinois: A Beacon of Hope

continued from cover page

out a beacon of hope to workers and businesses across the country who are seeking real solutions to America's health care crisis.

Public Hearings Throughout the State

A Taskforce charged by the Health Care Justice Act with drafting the state's universal health care plan has begun an ambitious schedule of town hall-style public hearings in all 19 Congressional Districts of the state. On October 5th, hundreds of residents of Illinois' Congressional District 1 gathered at the United Church of Christ in Chicago's South Side to hear health care consumers, physicians, nurses, hospital representatives, union retirees, minority advocates, and other Illinois residents testify about why it is so urgent for the Taskforce to draft a health care plan that achieves the goals of the Health Care Justice Act.

The Taskforce will complete the congressional district hearings in mid-May, with a target date for drafting and submitting its universal health care plan to the General Assembly by no later than October 2006.

Health Care for All Illinois Children

In November, Governor Blagojevich signed into law the All Kids health insurance program, the broadest plan to insure children enacted by any state. The program offers children access to comprehensive health care, including doctor's visits, hospital stays, prescription drugs, vision care, dental care and medical devices like eyeglasses and asthma inhalers.

Jim Duffet, executive director of the Campaign for Better Health Care and a member of the Health Care Justice Act Taskforce said,

"The All Kids program is a wonderful achievement. The goal of the Health Care Justice Act is to make affordable, high quality health care available to every resident of Illinois, and the All Kids program brings our state more than 250,000 children closer to reaching that goal."

Optimism Grows

Optimism grows as support for universal health care reform builds across Illinois. On November 10th, hundreds of enthusiastic delegates filled the annual convention of the Campaign for Better Health Care,



(l to r) Dr. Niva Lubin-Johnson, Governor Blagojevich, Jim Duffett and Doug Dority at CBHC Convention, November 2005

a strategic campaign partner of America's Agenda. The delegates were greeted by a video message from US Senator Barack Obama, who told them he looks forward to working with them in a continued partnership to achieve affordable health care for working families.

"Thanks to the Campaign for Better Health Care," Senator Obama told the delegates, "the Health Care Justice Act enjoys widespread support from many organizations across the state... Because of your organization, important progress on health care has continued in Illinois."

Later, the convention delegates stood in thundering applause for Governor Blagojevich. "Today, health care for all of our children. Tomorrow, health care for all adults," he said.

Illinois Labor Leaders Meet to Coordinate Support for Illinois Universal Health Care

Thirty-six Illinois labor leaders met with America's Agenda President Doug Dority, Executive Director Mark Blum, and Campaign for Better Health Care Executive Director Jim Duffet on November 8th to lay the groundwork for a coordinated effort to give labor an effective voice in the Health Care Justice Act process that is moving forward in the state.

Illinois AFL-CIO President Margaret Blackshere, one of the leaders who called for the meeting held at the Unite Union Hall in Chicago said, "Affordable health care for all working families has long been a top priority for labor." She joined a number of union leaders in emphasizing the strategic importance of assuring that labor has a real voice in formulating the state universal health care plan that is being drafted.

Since the year 2000, health insurance premiums have risen at five times the rate of wages. "This is a crisis we can't afford to ignore," Doug Dority said. "The Health Care Justice Act has created an unprecedented opportunity to resolve this crisis, but we can only seize this opportunity if our unions are mobilized to participate in the process."



Doug Dority (second from left) and Illinois labor leaders plan their strategy for an Illinois universal health care campaign.

Massachusetts Health Care Reform Presses Forward

continued from cover page

mitttee charged with melding the bills into a single reform plan during the current 2006 legislative session. Governor Mitt Romney has proposed a third plan that contains elements of both the Senate and House plans. The Governor has a real political incentive for wishing to influence the final legislation – a possible run for President of the United States

The Massachusetts campaign for a universal health care amendment, known as the Health Care for Massachusetts Campaign, has saluted “the remarkable work of everyone involved in the current effort to expand access to affordable health care coverage for the residents of Massachusetts.” The campaign has asked its members to contact the conference committee members and urge them to work with each other to ensure as many residents of the Commonwealth as possible will have access to coverage that is as affordable and comprehensive as possible.

Massachusetts Labor for Health Care Adds Momentum

The compromise is being hammered out in the black box of the legislative conference committee. Whatever emerges, the job won't be complete until every resident in the state has a guarantee of access to affordable, comprehensive and fairly-funded health care coverage as a right under the state constitution. In 1988, Democratic Governor Michael Dukakis signed a Massachusetts universal health care bill into law,



Rand Wilson, IUE-CWA Local 201 and Julie Pinkham, Massachusetts Nurses Association lead Massachusetts health care strategy session.

only to have it rescinded by his Republican successor. “The amendment will assure two steps forward stays two steps forward. We've unfortunately seen great effort from committed people erode to the detriment of those in desperate need of health care,” says Julie Pinkham, executive director of the MNA.



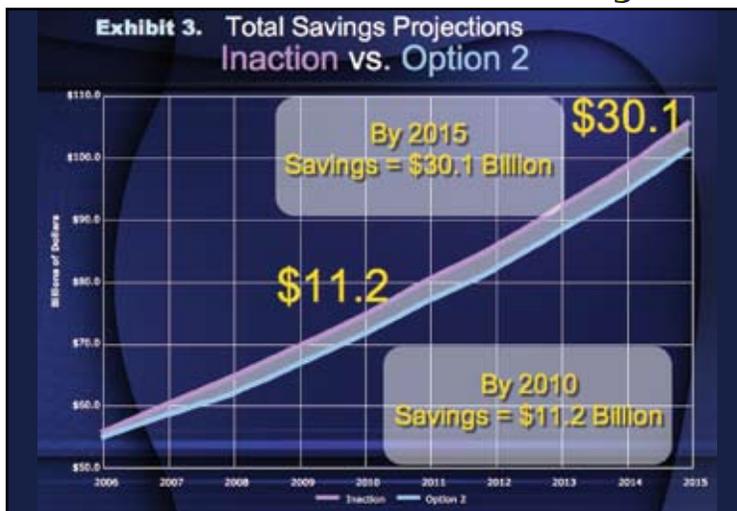
Activists strategize for health care amendment campaign.

With the goal of affordable health care for all in mind, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, America's Agenda, and scores of local union leaders have joined with the Health Care for Massachusetts Campaign to launch Massachusetts Labor for Health Care. The mission is education and mobilization of union members and our allies to win passage of a universal health care constitutional amendment.



Massachusetts local union leaders plan mobilization for constitutional amendment.

The Most Costly Policy Is to **DO NOTHING!**



Universal coverage based on expansion of the current public/private health insurance system.



Universal coverage with an expanded public health care system.

An analysis of universal health care reform for MA done by renowned economist Dr. Ken Thorpe demonstrates that either universal health care reform option will generate billions of dollars in savings for the state. With Option 2, MA will save a net of \$30.1 billion over 10 years. With Option 3, MA will save a net of \$104.8 billion. Without reform these health cost savings will be forgone.

This Power Point slide presentation is available at www.americasagenda.org.

Vermont: Universal Health Care Campaign Finds its Legs

continued from cover page

standards they needed to apply. Eventually, the legislature passed a universal health care bill. And last summer, Republican Governor Jim Douglas vetoed it.



VCHS launch press conference calls for universal health care reform. At podium, campaign spokesperson Jen Henry, a nurse at Fletcher-Allen Hospital and President of Vermont AFT.

Late last summer, state NEA leaders invited America's Agenda to meet with a group of Vermont health care reform activists to help them decide on the next steps. "The problem was basic," observed America's Agenda Executive Director Mark Blum. "The bill that passed the legislature did not have support of a broad-based campaign of working people and business leaders who could build support on the ground in their legislative districts, their churches, their communities. Without such a campaign, Vermonters had no effective way to deliver consequences to a governor who stood with the insurance industry to veto a bill that most Vermonters wanted. For the governor, there was no real downside.

"To deliver consequences, you have to build a campaign."

The Vermont Campaign for Health Care Security

And build a campaign they did. The Vermont NEA, AARP-Vermont, the Vermont State Employees' Association, Vermont Businesses for Social

Responsibility, the Vermont AFL-CIO, the Vermont Workers Center/JwJ, Vermont PIRG, and other state organizations founded the Vermont Campaign for Health Care Security. State logging and dairy industry associations joined. Collectively the member organizations represent more than 200,000

Vermonters. The Campaign has launched a mobilizing initiative, working with its member organizations. "All of us understood the moral and economic imperative of winning the right to affordable, high quality health care for every Vermonter," says Mark Hage, Vermont NEA's Director of Benefit Programs, who has a lead role in coordinating the campaign. "But now, we are developing the capacity to organize effective support in our communities, in our workplaces, and in the State House."

On January 1, six of Vermont's seven town and city mayors joined the Campaign in a press conference calling on the legislature and the governor to adopt effective reform legislation to assure affordable health care for all Vermonters and relieve municipal governments of the crushing burden of spiraling health insurance costs.

State legislators have not ignored these developments. In developing a "road map" to universal coverage, legislative leaders have consulted extensively with the Campaign. They have retained nationally respected health economist

Ken Thorpe to advise in developing a Vermont health reform plan that will drive down cost increases and extend affordable coverage to all. In mid-February, the 2006 Vermont universal health care bill was introduced.

"Voters are anxious about being able to afford the rising costs of health insurance for their families, says AARP-Vermont Director Greg Marchildon. Our own opinion research shows that control of spiraling health care costs and assurance of affordable coverage for all are no longer 'mile wide and inch deep issues.' These are the issues that are going to transform the political landscape of Vermont."

And with that transformation, there will be a downside to vetoing health care reform that protects the working families and business of Vermont.

"America's Agenda has lent our campaign unfaltering support and counsel at every step, yet they have entrusted us Vermonters to make every decision. This is a strategic partnership we want to continue from now until we win."
— Mark Hage
Director of Benefit Programs
Vermont NEA

When Reform is Illusory: HSAs

(From the Nov. 5, 2005 Boston Globe)

Permitting paper-thin insurance will boost the number of people nominally insured. But that doesn't assure durably affordable care for all of us. As State Senator Mark Montigny said recently, "The only thing worse than a high-price policy you can't afford is a low-cost policy you can't use."

continued from cover page

NYC Health Care Security Act Becomes Law

Taxpayers and 27,000 Grocery Workers and Their Families Will Benefit

At the Crossroads warns that uncontrolled The New York City Council took a significant step in the direction of universal coverage on October 11, 2005, when it voted to override Mayor Bloomberg's veto of the Health Care Security Act. The first of its kind in the country, the new law requires medium to large groceries to meet the industry standard of health care spending for their workers.

"Today's vote is a victory for New York workers, businesses and taxpayers..."

- New York JwJ Executive Director Adrienne Shropshire.

The City Council had support of a vibrant coalition of business leaders, labor unions, health policy advocates, religious leaders, and community groups organized by New York Jobs with Justice.

Currently, over 70% of employers in the grocery industry already pay for their employees' health care. However, "big box" stores such as Wal-Mart that refuse to provide adequate health care for their employees pressure responsible businesses to slash health benefits to remain competitive. The new law will stop this "race to the bottom".

Paul Sonn, Deputy Director of the Poverty Program at the Brennan Center of NYU Law School that advised City Council members in crafting the legislation explains, "The Health Care Security Act is a practical response to the costs that low-wage, no-benefits jobs impose on our communities."

Kentucky AFL-CIO Endorses Conyers' Single-Payer Bill

At their October convention, the Kentucky AFL-CIO adopted a resolution supporting Rep. John Conyers' bill HR 676 "Expanded and Improved Medicare for All", a single payer health care program for universal coverage. The resolution was introduced by AFSCME Local 2629.

Maine: Dirigo Health Saves State Nearly \$44 Million

continued from cover page

The battle against insurance companies and their allies opposed to confirming the remarkable success of Dirigo Health was fought inside the hearing room and outside, where members of the Maine AFL-CIO and allied organizations like the Maine Senior Citizens Council and the Maine Peoples Alliance took their message of support for Dirigo Health to the streets and to the media. Inside the hearing room, nationally respected economist Ken Thorpe, a strategic partner of America's Agenda in several of our pilot states, presented vital testimony at the hearing on behalf of Maine-based Consumers for Affordable Health Care. Dr. Thorpe's analysis and testimony were determinate in substantiating the millions of dollars of savings that Dirigo Health has generated.



Mainers and animal friends demand that Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield return savings generated by Dirigo Health.

"Measurable reductions in the overall cost of health care constitute recoverable savings," Superintendent Iuppa wrote in his decision. "It is the responsibility of [payers] and providers to negotiate in good faith to pass these savings through to consumers."

Nevertheless, some insurers who would be assessed for the Dirigo-generated savings have appeared more inclined to pass the "savings offset payment" on to consumers through insurance premium hikes. Gov. John Baldacci has stated firmly that it would be "unacceptable" for insurance companies to do so.

Nevertheless, some insurers who would be assessed for the Dirigo-generated savings have appeared more inclined to pass the "savings offset payment" on to consumers through insurance premium hikes. Gov. John Baldacci has stated firmly that it would be "unacceptable" for insurance companies to do so.

Dirigo to Strengthen Economic Growth

In discussions over the past several months, America's Agenda and Maine AFL-CIO leaders have emphasized the potential for Dirigo Health to become a key tool in revitalization of the state's economy, with the reduced cost of insurance working as an economic incentive to keep good jobs in Maine and attract new businesses and jobs to the state. At the annual convention of



Governor Baldacci

the Maine AFL-CIO on November 16th, Governor Baldacci announced a bold new expansion of Dirigo Health insurance coverage. The governor said he intends to work with America's Agenda and Maine unions to expand eligibility for participation in the Dirigo health plan to unions and their employers in "distressed industries in our state."

This expansion will represent a major advance of the Dirigo program from one that focuses primarily on covering the uninsured to a plan that offers Maine unions and their employers the option of relatively low-cost, comprehensive health insurance coverage subsidized by the state. As Governor Baldacci asserted in his remarks to the Maine AFL-CIO, "I want Dirigo Health to be here for all Mainers."



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Public Support of Universal Health Care is Making Provider CEOs Nervous

For years, the multi-billion dollar health care industry pretty much ignored a steady drumbeat of complaints over the failures of our health care system. Not anymore. Not with statewide campaigns for universal health care winning widespread support.

To preserve the system, not change it, stakeholders for the status quo are fighting back.

At a reception on Capitol Hill in late October, some of the biggest names and biggest wallets in the health care industry launched The Health Care Solutions Group.

In a press release, board member Jack Bovender Jr. said “we want to be the place where the best minds intent on improving the U.S. health care system can meet, discuss and test solutions.” Bovender is chairman and CEO of HCA, the nation’s largest for-profit hospital company. (You might recall that HCA was founded by the father of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist. For years, Frist was criticized for holding HCA stock while directing legislation on Medicare reform, and

he is now being investigated by the SEC for insider trading).

U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper, the lone Congressional member on the Solutions board, said “we want to be an unbiased source that people across the country can rely on for valid information.”

Dr. David Osborn is the executive director of the new Health Care Solutions Group. He said policy makers “need an objective, informed perspective from people who truly understand health care from the inside out. We believe we will be able to provide good advice that reflects the views of the key stakeholders who will be impacted by changes to health policy or new legislation.”

The Solutions Group will appoint a “distinguished group of fellows from information technology, health care policy, government, insurance, venture capital and pharmaceuticals.” (Notably absent from this “distinguished” group are any representatives of health care consumers or working families).

Where do you go for breaking news from the front line battles for universal health care?

To the America's Agenda website, of course.

www.americasagenda.org



Check out the website!

