

Local citizens group continues to fight for health-care reform

By Julia Sampson
Olean Times Herald

While the nation's leaders joust about how to create a nationwide health-care package, Athena Godet-Calogeras of Allegany leads a group of concerned citizens in Cattaraugus County, known as the Health Care Access Coalition, to advocate health-care reform.

The coalition aims to help "untangle the confusion of the health-care system," the former biology teacher said. "When you are sick, you don't have the energy to fight for yourself."

A total volunteer effort, the Health Care Access Coalition holds educational events, has an informational Web site and is involved in letter-writing campaigns to several organizations, including government officials.

"We do what is most doable, what's most effective," Mrs. Godet-Calogeras said. "We help speak out for those people who won't speak out."

She said that the group does what it can to keep the issue alive, to ensure everyone has quality, affordable health care.

Universal health care has been an issue in the U.S. for well over 40 years.

"Medicare started in 1964, as a precursor to universal health care," she said. "And what's getting lost in the whole health care issue is the people. How can you have 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' if you don't have your health?"

The 20-year veteran of advocacy said it is discouraging looking at the bill process when "one out of 10 people in Cattaraugus County do not have health care and of those who do, they are typically underinsured."

According to the New York state Department of Health Web site, as of Dec. 31, 2008, approximately 21,000 of the almost 84,000 Cattaraugus County residents counted in the 2000 census, and approximately 9,000 of almost 50,000 Allegany County residents, have managed-care health insurance.

Statewide, the gap between those who have managed-care health insurance and those who do not is even greater: 5.9 million of the 18.9 million residents subscribe to managed-care insurance. However, according to information obtained from the state Insurance Department, when private insurance is taken into account, there are 15.2 million New York residents insured. Yet, that still leaves approximately 3.7 million residents who are uninsured. In addition, these figures do not include those who are underinsured.

"The needs of the people have to be in the forefront," Mrs. Godet-Calogeras said. "Our constitution states: 'of the people, by the people, for the people.' Our government is founded on this principle."

She asks how health care can be affordable as long as insurance companies can establish their

own prices.

"When the worry isn't, 'What is wrong with me?' but, 'How much is it going to cost?' this becomes a huge problem," she said.

"When the worry isn't, 'What is wrong with me?' but, 'How much is it going to cost?' this becomes a huge problem," she said.

U.S. Rep. Eric Massa, D-Corning, says that the focus should primarily be on reforming the "largely unregulated health-insurance sector. I believe that the virtual monopoly that private, for-profit, health insurance corporations have across our nation is the biggest reason why we are facing out-of-control health care costs."

U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., says she also believes that the high cost of health care is a serious problem for many families and employers.

Opponents of current health care reform criticize, among other things, mandates that effectively force citizens and employers to purchase health insurance or face financial penalties.

John Camus, CEO of the Olean Medical Group, said that use of the term "universal health care" is such a broad statement. "I'm in favor of any movement that promotes the need for health insurance to be accessed by all," he said. "People should always have coverage and care at a reasonable cost."

A universal health care plan would have multifaceted benefits for Olean Medical Group, he said. In addition, to accommodate the increase in patients covered, the group would have to build up services – more physicians and nurses would have to be hired to handle the influx.

"How do we make the shift into something better? We might hear more about it (health care issues) this month," Mr. Camus said.

He also noted that the Olean Medical Group is not only a provider but an employer that offers insurance, therefore seeing impacts of the health care issue from many angles.

"We need a system that is fair all around," he said.

Mrs. Godet-Calogeras said, "I would like to understand why people are so opposed to radical health care reform? I just don't know if it is disinformation or lack of information out there."

(Contact reporter Julia Sampson at jsampson@oleantimesherald.com)