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## Pickets favor national health care

By **DIANE CHUN**

Sun staff writer

More than two dozen demonstrators turned out in Gainesville Wednesday afternoon to call for a health-care system that covers everyone in America.

Citizens health care hearing

- What: A closer look at HR 676 and health insurance problems.
- Who: Residents are invited to testify.
- When: Saturday July 8, 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- Where: Thelma Bolton Center, 516 NE 2nd Avenue



From the number of passing motorists who honked as they passed the offices of BlueCross BlueShield of Florida during rush hour, the picketers had struck a chord.

Bill Gilbert, 72, demonstrates Wednesday in front of BlueCross BlueShield of Florida on 39th Avenue. (TIM HUSSIN/Special to The Sun)

The protest was organized to call attention to and support HR 676, a federal bill calling for universal national health insurance that is now before a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The protest was organized by the Alachua County Labor Party. Similar events were held in cities across the country Wednesday.

"The health-care crisis is getting to the point where a lot of people are experiencing higher costs, higher deductibles or are being forced out of their insurance all together," said Jenny Brown, one of the organizers.

Brown signed up for BlueCross BlueShield coverage last year. This year, she said, the cost of that coverage went up 29 percent, catching her by surprise.

"They said they had state approval to raise premiums, but they didn't say it would be close to 30 percent," she said as she waved a sign at passing traffic.

Those holding protest signs contended that insurance companies like BlueCross BlueShield are the main obstacle blocking a universal health-care system in the United States.

"BlueCross BlueShield and other insurers make up a tremendous lobbying force

against health-care reform of any kind," Brown said. "They are using our premium dollars to lobby Congress against it."

Rick Curran of BlueCross BlueShield's public affairs office watched the protest from a spot some 50 feet away from the office at 3811 NW 40th Terrace.

Curran declined to comment on specifics of the demonstrators' charges.

"It is their right to make their views known, but we don't necessarily agree with them," he said.

Democratic congressional candidate Dave Bruderly of Gainesville was on hand, saying, "We have to have a vision about health-care reform in this country, and House Bill 676 is a great place to start the debate. Right now, it's every man, woman and child for themselves."

HR 676 was introduced in the House by Rep. John Conyers, D-Ga. A similar bill went nowhere in the last legislative session, but the current version has 71 co-sponsors.

HR 676 would create a publicly financed, privately delivered health-care program that expands and improves on Medicare, supporters say. Called the U.S. National Health Insurance Act, it aims to ensure that all Americans, guaranteed by law, will have access to the highest quality, most cost-effective health-care services, regardless of employment, income or health status.

Under HR 676, a family of three making \$40,000 a year would spend about \$1,600 per year for health-care coverage, supporters say.

Private health insurers would be prohibited from selling coverage that duplicates the benefits outlined in the bill. The conversion to a not-for-profit health-care system would take place over a 15-year period, according to the bill.

Dr. Chad Hood took the microphone to address the group, urging them to contact their representatives to urge support of the bill. Hood is in practices internal medicine in Gainesville.

Rep. Corrine Brown, a Democrat, has signed on as a co-sponsor, Hood said, while Republican Rep. Cliff Stearns "remains on the fence."

Earlier in the day, about seven members of the group debated aides to U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns on a conference call, arguing that the Ocala Republican should support the bill. An aide said Stearns, who was unable to handle the call himself because of a personal matter, would be unlikely to support the proposal because he is philosophically inclined toward allowing a choice of insurers.

"It's clear that Stearns is putting his own ideology ahead of what his constituents want," said Mark Piotrowski, one of the proponents of the bill.

Several area groups will sponsor a citizen's Congressional health-care hearing on July 8, in order to continue discussion of the issue.

Sun staff writer Jeff Adleson contributed to this report.

