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## **Time for Health Care NOW!**

**By MARK PIOTROWSKI**

Special to the Sun

What do 14,000 doctors, 120 labor unions, 71 members of Congress, 25 Central Labor Councils, 65 percent of Americans and 51,000 Alachua County residents have in common?

They all want a system of universal health care that would cover each and every U.S. resident for all their health care needs.

Those 71 members of Congress, including Rep. Corrine Brown, have signed on to H.R. 676, Rep. John Conyers' National Health Insurance Act. Passing H.R. 676 into law would allow the United States to join every other industrialized country (and many so-called unindustrialized countries) in guaranteeing health care as a right for its citizens.

Healthcare NOW, a national coalition of community, faith-based and labor organizations has called for a National Day of Action on June 7, in support of H.R. 676. That date, 6/7/06, was chosen to correspond to the bill's number. Simultaneous events are being planned in 90 cities, including Gainesville.

From Seattle to Pittsburgh, from Detroit to Gainesville, citizens will be drawing attention to the health care crisis and calling for Congress to pass H.R. 676. Here in Alachua County we will be holding a press conference and speak-out outside the Blue Cross/Blue Shield offices at 3811 NW 40th Terrace (39th Avenue near NW 43rd Street) at 4:30 p.m.

H.R. 676 would provide health care to everyone in the U.S. regardless of age, job status, marital status, income or health. This comprehensive coverage would include guaranteed benefits for the entire family and would expand coverage far beyond what most current health insurance plans offer, including dental care, long term care, prescription drugs, preventative care and mental health services.

Under H.R. 676 we will no longer have to worry about double-digit insurance premium increases, bills, co-pays, deductibles, out-of-pocket expenses, mountains of paperwork or denials of care. They'll all be things of the past. And contrary to the hysteria the insurance companies and HMOs will try to whip up, we will have complete choice of doctors, hospitals and other medical providers.

How can we afford all of this?

A better question might be, "How can we afford not to?" This system would cost the same amount of money that is now spent on health care in the U.S. Funds to cover everyone would come from savings from a vast reduction of paperwork, existing government spending on health care, savings from rational bulk procurement of medications, a tax on the top 5 percent of income earners, a small tax on stock and bond transfers, and a phased-in payroll tax that is less than what employers currently pay on average for employee health coverage that is much less comprehensive.

About 95 percent of Americans would pay less under H.R. 676 than they are currently paying for our inadequate, patchwork system of health insurance.

Currently up to 30 percent of insurance premium dollars are wasted on paperwork and profit, compared to only 3 percent overhead with a public system like Medicare. Instead of our premium dollars - money taken out of our paychecks - going to things like advertising, huge CEO salaries and political lobbying, these funds would be redirected back into health care.

How badly do people want universal health care?

More people in Alachua County voted yes on the universal health care non-binding referendum (51,050) on the 2000 ballot than voted for either George Bush (34,177) or Al Gore (47,365). It passed in all 53 precincts, regardless of whether Bush or Gore carried that precinct, and got more votes than all but one candidate (then-Representative Karen Thurman).

After June 7, citizens in north Florida will have another chance to help make H.R. 676 a reality at the July 8 Citizens' Congressional Health Care Hearing. The hearing will be held from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Thelma Bolton Center (516 NE 2nd Ave.).

All area residents are invited to testify about their health care insurance problems, including exorbitant costs, denials of care, being tied to a job for insurance, paperwork and insurance company obstacles, lack of insurance due to large premiums, and bankruptcy resulting from costs of illness.

Reps. Corrine Brown, Cliff Stearns, John Conyers, and Dennis Kucinich have been invited to receive testimony, as have the Alachua County and Gainesville City Commissioners.

The Alachua County Labor Party, The Central Labor Council of North Central Florida, Gainesville Area National Organization for Women (NOW), the Alachua County NAACP, the Health Care is a Human Right Coalition, Graduate Assistants United and Physicians for a National Health Plan, among others, are organizing the hearing.

If you wish to tell your experience or help spread the word, please call the Alachua County Labor Party at 352-375-2832. Please visit our website: [www.floridalaborparty.org/alachua](http://www.floridalaborparty.org/alachua) for more information about the June 7 National Day of Action or July 8 Citizens' Congressional Hearing.

*Mark Piotrowski is the organizer for the Alachua County Labor Party.*

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