

Radical Women

5018 Rainier Avenue South, Seattle, WA 98118 • 206-722-6057 • RWSeattle@mindspring.com •
www.RadicalWomen.org

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CONTACTS: Mary Ann Curtis: 206-722-6057 (office); 206-409-2157 (cell)
Margaret Viggiani: 206-722-2453 (office); 206-883-3053 (cell)

Organizers say campaign to save Washington Basic Health Plan is having an impact

SEATTLE. Twenty-nine-year-old Helen Fowler has amassed \$50,000 in medical bills for emergency hospitalization and surgery while on the waiting list for the Washington State Basic Health Plan. Now she's joined the Sisters Organize for Survival (SOS) campaign to save and expand the publicly subsidized insurance that currently serves 60,000 low-income residents.

"When we began this effort eight months ago," says SOS coordinator Gina Petry, "Basic Health was being hit with a 43% budget cut and Governor Christine Gregoire had told the press she was willing to sacrifice it completely while fully funding a tunnel to replace Seattle's Alaskan Way Viaduct. But now Gregoire and other legislators are saying they want to keep Basic Health. We want to make sure they restore the 40,000 people who've been forced off the plan by rate increases and also provide for the vast number without any medical coverage." Petry, who works on the staff of Group Health Cooperative, adds, "Frankly, it makes me really mad that politicians are cutting health coverage and essential services at a time when more assistance is needed than ever before. It's an outrageous attack on the working poor and the most vulnerable."

SOS, a campaign led by Radical Women, started going door-to-door in Seattle neighborhoods in the summer of 2009 to talk to people about how they were being affected by the economic crisis. Anxiety over healthcare was a concern raised by many even before cuts to Basic Health were announced. SOS mounted a petition drive to the governor and legislators and organized a well-attended community tribunal that had 30 endorsers, including poverty groups, labor unions, and organizations of people of color, immigrants, gays, socialists and students. The tribunal found the governor and legislature "guilty of abandoning the poor" by having eliminated tens of thousands from the Basic Health rolls. The assembly enthusiastically endorsed a call to push for a state income tax on the wealthy to fund health and human services. "We're not pitting Basic Health against other vitally needed programs," says Cee Fisher, a Filipina immigrant who spoke for Radical Women at the tribunal. "The solution is to tax the profits of large corporations and the income of millionaires." Washington is one of only seven states with no income tax.

On January 12, as Governor Gregoire prepared to give her State of the State address, SOS supporters gathered at the capitol in Olympia for a "State of Emergency Rally" with the

message “Fund Health – Tax Wealth.” Hefty stacks of petitions signed by more than 3,600 individuals were delivered to the Governor and to legislators overseeing budget and health committees. Giant red scrolls displaying filled petitions were unfurled down the marble steps of the capitol building. Speakers from several cities included Alton McDonald, founder of New Century Justice Network; Monica Peabody, director of POWER (Parents Organizing for Welfare and Economic Rights); Maritza Mera, for Organized Workers for Labor Solidarity; Adrienne Weller, for the Freedom Socialist Party; Linde Knighton, for the Progressive Party; and Dick Burkhart, a leader of Unitarian Universalist Voices for Justice.

Adriana Harman, speaking for SOS, described how she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 20. “Thankfully, I had adequate health coverage,” she said. Now at 32, she is unemployed, without health insurance, one of 80,000 people on the Basic Health waiting list and worried about what will happen if she gets sick again.

Catherine Byrd, a Spokane home care worker and organizer for SEIU Healthcare 775NW, said many home health and nursing home workers were on the Basic Health Plan before they achieved a contract that included medical insurance. Now this medical coverage is in jeopardy and Basic Health is unavailable. “Home care workers without healthcare? That doesn’t make any sense,” she exclaimed.

In addition to public actions, SOS members have testified at hearings and gotten their message out at community gatherings and legislators’ town hall meetings. Senators Rosa Franklin and Adam Kline and Representative Scott White are among those who have stated their support for a state income tax and saving the Basic Health Plan.

A second rally on the capitol steps, “For Reproductive Rights and Basic Health,” took place on January 22, the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion nationally. Again, speakers representing a range of feminist, community and labor groups pledged to save the Basic Health Plan and also to improve access to abortion. Two-thirds of Washington counties have no doctors who perform the procedure.

Speaking on behalf of SOS was Ms. Fowler, minimally employed and deeply in debt because of uninsured health emergencies. “There are thousands of people like me who are living in a twilight of pain and neglect because of lack of medical care. Something needs to change here! Tax wealth to fund public health!” she urged.

Sisters Organize for Survival invites the public to participate in weekly mobilizing meetings and in lobbying efforts and public actions in defense of Basic Health. The website www.SaveBasicHealth.org gives details of SOS’s current activities.

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