



Tuesday, September 2, 2009

Health Care Reform Vigil, Highland Park, NJ

Statement of Eve Weissman, Health Care Campaign Coordinator, NJ Citizen Action

Welcome everyone and thank you for being here with us tonight. My name is Eve Weissman, I am the Health Care Campaign Coordinator for NJ Citizen Action, the State's largest, independent citizen watchdog coalition representing over 60,000 families and over 100 affiliate organizations across the State. We are living in a unique historical moment—a time at which we are closer to achieving quality, affordable health care for everyone than we have ever come before, despite many past efforts.

It is fitting that as we are assembled together today looking forward at what we hope is the final stretch of a decades-long fight to win a basic right for the people of this country, that we remember how we got to this moment and who got us here.

Ted Kennedy called health care the “cause of his life” and it was. Yet in many ways the biggest cause of his life was public service, was activism itself, his belief in the power of people working together to make lasting and positive change — and to use their government to achieve things they couldn't achieve on their own.

Because of his commitment to build a health care system that would provide the best access and care to all, Kennedy chipped away for years to make consistent improvements in the health care system even when there was much less hope of comprehensive reform than we have now. Our country's history and the personal history of millions of families are marked by his successes:

- In 1966, Kennedy helped establish the community health center model in the United States. Community health centers are now serving 20 million low-income Americans around the country.
- In 1985, Kennedy led the fight to enact COBRA, giving workers the ability to purchase health care through their employer after they have been let go from their job.
- In 1996, Kennedy co-sponsored HIPAA, which now ensures access to health care coverage for an estimated 25 million Americans who move from one job to another, are self-employed or have pre-existing medical conditions.
- In 1997, Kennedy was instrumental in passing the CHIP program that gives health care to millions of children.
- In 2006, Kennedy passed the Family Opportunity Act, which provides states with the opportunity to expand Medicaid coverage to children with special needs, giving low- and middle-income families with disabled children the opportunity to purchase health coverage under Medicaid.
- From 1997-2008, Kennedy helped grant Massachusetts the Medicaid waivers it needed to pass its state health care reform plan.
- In 2008, Kennedy enacted legislation to reform the inequities in the way mental health and substance use disorders are treated by the insurance industry, a 10 year battle.

When it comes to health care, Kennedy's entire life was about helping to create the extraordinary and historic opportunity we have today. There is simply no greater way to pay tribute to his life — and honor his legacy — than to fight for quality, affordable health care and insist that we win it all this time. Settling for anything less is the last thing he'd want us to do.

As our Senators and Representatives prepare to go back to DC next week, we're here to remind them that New Jerseyans support quality, affordable health care for all including the choice of a public health insurance plan.

The time is now to do our part—we can't wait any longer to fulfill the legacy that Senator Kennedy has left us and we should not shrink from following his example. He would not have wasted this opportunity to seize the moment and advance a cause that touches everyone's life in the most personal way, including, ultimately, his own. The best tribute we can pay him today is to affirm our commitment to get this done this year and to urge our Congressional Delegation to do the same.