

December 8, 2006

Senator Charles Schumer
United States Senate
313 Hart Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Schumer:

We are writing as members of the Healthcare Committee of the Coalition for Democracy of Central New York. Our committee came together out of concern for the state of the U.S. healthcare system.

In September, we invited residents of Delaware and Otsego Counties to come to a Healthcare Speakout to voice their concerns about our healthcare system. In response, people poured out their stories: Some lack health insurance altogether, others forgo care because of high premiums and co-pays or because basic needs like long-term care, dental and mental health care aren't covered. People complained bitterly about the mountains of insurance paperwork and the resulting confusion. The list of problems was huge, some leading to tragic consequences. (A summary of comments from the Speakout is enclosed.)

In the months since, we have made a study of possible reforms for our failing healthcare system. As you know, the U.S. leaves 47 million people uninsured. Our patchwork system of employer-based health insurance forces people to scramble for coverage every time they change jobs or move. And yet, we in the U.S. pay almost twice as much for this healthcare as our neighbors in Canada. What's more, our system puts American industry at a growing competitive disadvantage. U.S. automakers say healthcare costs for U.S. workers amount to some \$1,500 per car – money they don't have to spend in countries with national health insurance.

After our study, the Healthcare Committee agreed that piecemeal reforms will not solve our healthcare crisis. We have agreed that we all want to work for a national healthcare system that is simple, portable, publicly funded, and covers everyone.

On November 19, we sponsored a fascinating discussion in Oneonta with Dr. Laura Chalfin. Dr. Chalfin had practiced medicine in our area for 15 years. A year-and-a half ago, she moved her practice to British Columbia. We invited her to talk with us and others in the community about her experiences with the two systems. What we heard was eye-opening. With their universal Care Cards, Canadians can depend on receiving needed healthcare whenever and wherever they need it -- imagine that! Dr. Chalfin was glowing about the ability of the Canadians' national insurance system to provide high-quality care for everyone at a much lower cost than in the U.S. She noted that in her practice in Delhi,

NY, she'd had a staff of three. Now she only needs a staff of one, thanks to reduced paperwork. That is just one way that eliminating the tangle of private health insurance companies from our healthcare system could reduce our nation's spiraling healthcare costs.

Support for national insurance is growing in our area. On October 11, for example, the Ulster County legislature voted by a margin of 28-2 (including 12 Republicans) in support of "comprehensive, affordable high-quality health care through a single-payer financing mechanism for all Americans." On June 7, the Ithaca Common Council and Mayor Carolyn Peterson passed a resolution 9-0 in support of national health insurance. The resolution calls on Congress to pass single-payer legislation that would cover all Americans' basic, preventive, and emergency health care needs. A recent survey of 600 registered New York State voters found nearly half support replacing private insurance with universal public insurance. The next most popular proposal, for mandating employer coverage, garnered only 35% support. (The poll was conducted in October 2006 by Pace University, New York Magazine, WCBS 2 News, and WNYC.)

In the past, many elected officials have said that while they supported universal public insurance, it simply wasn't politically viable. We think times have changed. What isn't viable today is trying to apply band-aids to extend the life of our complex, broken down healthcare system. Instead, we need an overhaul. We need a proven, simple solution: a public system like one of those adopted by any other industrialized nation in the world.

We hope you and our other elected officials have the political courage to do what clearly needs to be done: adopt national health insurance or extend the VA's health system to cover everyone. Perhaps you would consider creating a citizens' advisory committee on healthcare reform. If so, we would be honored to participate. And be assured that if you sign on to a bill to create a national healthcare system that is simple, portable, publicly funded, and covers everyone, we will do everything we can to organize in our area for it.

We'd be happy to discuss this issue with you or your staff. Please respond to: John Ruland, 481 Hell Hollow Road, Otego, NY, 14825, (607) 433-1833, or email Laura McClure in Bovina Center, NY at lauramcclure@earthlink.net.

Sincerely,