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## POLITICS

# Health care reform considered

By Clea Badion  
Emerald Contributor

SALEM — A health care proposal that would create a Canadian-style, "single-payer" system is one of three health insurance reform bills being considered by the Oregon Legislature this year.



The bill would create a socialized health system that would pay for all covered health care costs through a state payroll tax.

According to the Oregon Health Action Campaign, a coalition of labor and community organizations, a single-payer system would establish an insurance pool that collects health care funds and then pays all covered health care costs.

Such comprehensive coverage is already a reality in Canada and most other industrial nations. According to the coalition, the United States and South Africa are the only two industrialized nations without a single-payer health care system.

Coalition Director Ellen Pinney said that 450,000 Oregonians are uninsured — about one in five.

But the uncertainty those uninsured residents face could be avoided by Senate Bill 790, which would bring this type of insurance plan to Oregon. SB 790 would also establish a state payroll tax, while maintaining other funding such as Medicare and Medicaid.

"This bill allows the state to allocate resources in the most efficient way," Pinney said, explaining that insurance companies take up about 23 percent of health care costs. By eliminating those costs, as this bill does, health care would become much cheaper, she said.

Pinney said 16 states now have single-payer insurance systems in the works, but none has been implemented yet.

Although this isn't the only health care reform plan proposed this session, Pinney thinks this bill is the best. "This is the only state bill to give adequate health care coverage," she said.

Mark Sigel, an assistant on the Senate Health Insurance and Bio-Ethics Committee, said that under the 1989 Oregon Basic Health Services Act, all Oregonians under the federal poverty line are supposed to be covered by Medicare.

The problem, Sigel said, is that the Basic Services Act leaves part-time workers uncovered,

and the act does not address rising health insurance costs.

To fill in these holes, Senate Majority Leader John Kitzhaber, D-Roseburg, has proposed a health access and cost control act that would provide coverage for part-time workers and restructure the small insurance system.

"It extends health insurance to people who are unemployed," Sigel said. "It gives everyone in Oregon health insurance."

Although Kitzhaber's bill, SB 1076, would correct some of the problems, Sigel said the single-payer bill is more cost-efficient.

The Canadian-style bill "reduces costs better than Kitzhaber's plan," Sigel said. "If you have the whole state in one group, the state becomes the single purchaser; they can cut better deals that way."

Along with Kitzhaber's bill and the Canadian-style proposal, Gov. Barbara Roberts has also proposed a bill that would establish an Oregon Health Authority to administer the insurance.

Rep. Beverly Stein, D-Portland, who co-sponsored the bill, said HB 3082 establishes a standard benefits package in which all insurance is put together and sold by the state and then sold to private insurance agencies.

Stein said she sees both Kitzhaber's and Roberts' bills as steps toward a single-payer system because all the money would come to the state, which would then purchase the insurance.

Regardless of the fate of these two bills, she said she hopes that a single-payer system is eventually established. "The beauty of (SB) 790 is cost-control. It strips out the administrative costs," she said.

But the chances of the single-payer bill passing in the Legislature this year seem unlikely. Sigel said that with Kitzhaber's and the governor's bills also in the works, it would be difficult for the Canadian-style bill to pass.

Rep. Carl Hosticka, D-Eugene and a single-payer sponsor, agrees that the chances of the bill passing this session are slim.

"It will be considered, but I'm not sure it will get an opportunity for a vote," he said. "People are afraid that it will interfere with Kitzhaber's bill."

But Hosticka also said that a single-payer system would be reconsidered soon because Kitzhaber's bill isn't efficient enough.

"The state becomes one more of many insurance agencies. It won't work because it's too complicated," he said.

Hosticka said he would continue to push for a single-payer system.

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