



The week of the living uninsured

This is “Cover the Uninsured Week” – the fourth such week in four years. They haven’t been good weeks or good years.

Year after year, the sponsors of “Cover the Uninsured Week” report higher numbers of Americans without health insurance. Four years ago, 40.9 million Americans were uninsured. Now it’s 45.8 million and climbing.

This is like watching a horror movie. Call it “The Week of the Living Uninsured.” In every one of these weeks since 2003, we’ve watched lab-coated health professionals and business-suited executives gather at our health clinics to talk about this problem with earnest concern. And still the uninsured emerge in larger numbers every year.

Maybe I’m being too harsh. “Cover the Uninsured Week” has at least called attention to a major failing of our health care system. You can go to its Web site at www.CoverTheUninsured.org and discover new information about the epidemic of the uninsured in America. Examples: More than half of Americans without health insurance don’t get health care when they need it, and 80 percent of the uninsured are in families headed by working adults.

But the producers of “Cover the Uninsured Week” continue to focus more on the consequences of this epidemic and less on its causes. And they have little to say about its cures.

Go to the Kaiser Family Foundation Web site at www.kff.org, and you’ll find a more blunt assessment of why more and more Americans are joining the ranks of the uninsured: “The number of uninsured age 65 and under increased by nearly six million between 2000 and 2004, primarily due to a decline in employer-sponsored insurance.” The foundation notes that, during that four-year period, the proportion of Americans under 65 who get health insurance through employment declined by five

percent. That’s a huge change, which computes to another six million Americans who no longer bring home their health care with their paychecks.

At some point, this debate about consequences has to recognize causes and get real about cures. And this is where the sponsors and partners behind “Cover the Uninsured Week,” who range from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, health insurers and drug companies to consumer groups, foundations and the AFL-CIO, are hopelessly deadlocked.

You can’t find a straightforward admission that employers are abandoning health care for their workers on the “Cover the Uninsured Week” Web site. And if you click on “What you can do,” you’re asked to sign an e-mail letter to your congressperson to “urge you to make health coverage for Americans your top priority.” Any member of Congress on the receiving end of that message can easily click the reply button to say that he or she agrees with you and is working on common-sense solutions that will be fair to employers, workers and consumers alike. This exchange will be another triumph of form letters over substance.

A problem this large doesn’t remain unsolved for so long because there aren’t solutions. It remains unsolved because vested interests with political clout can block solutions that will cost them money.

That’s the real horror of our feckless search for health care reform. We are blocked at every turn as we search for ways to solve the problems of shrinking coverage and rising costs. Measures to force employers to pay their fair share for their workers’ health insurance are nixed by the business community. Expansions of Medicare to cover children are blocked by the government-haters who would rather privatize Medicare than expand it. Purchasing pools for prescription drugs are vetoed by the pharmaceutical lobby.

Meanwhile, as we become more desperate for solutions, we stumble onto paths of least resistance which offer some hope of universal health care that business groups, anti-government ideologues and drug company lobbyists won’t oppose.

Massachusetts just went down one of those benighted paths. Here’s where it leads: Don’t count on your employer to provide health insurance, buy your own.

Meanwhile, if we have to keep reliving this week, we should demand a different script. Maybe we should call it “Desperate Working Families Week.” But, whatever the title, we need to demand more reality in this production and a plot line that leads to action.

The realities are compelling enough to hold most viewers’ attention. Employers are abandoning health insurance for their workers, not only because they can, but because they gain economic advantage over their competitors by doing so. And we as taxpayers will never be able to make up for the human and economic costs of this abandonment by expanding government health care to working families — because the number of working people without health care is multiplying beyond our capacity to cover them with our tax dollars.

Let’s ask America’s working families to defend the principle that we should be able to earn our health care from our jobs. That doesn’t mean that employers have to sponsor separate health insurance plans, but it does mean that they should contribute to a system that keeps health insurance affordable for all working families.

Otherwise, if we let employers abandon health care for their workers, we’ll be left with two very scary choices: Buy your own health insurance or join the ranks of the uninsured.

Tim Nesbitt is a former president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Union wins government retraining benefits — over Freightliner’s objection

Three days before Christmas 2005, Freightliner LLC laid off 130 workers at its Portland truck-making plant. The company expected workers would get unemployment benefits for a bit, and then would be recalled when production picked up.

Freightliner didn’t expect that one of its unions would apply to the government for retraining benefits. But that’s what one union did. At the advice of Bob Tackett at Labor’s Community Service Agency, AFL-CIO, Machinists District Lodge 24 representative Joe Kear petitioned the U.S. Department of Labor to certify that a trade-related lay-off had occurred.

Kear saw work moving to a Freightliner plant in Santiago Tianguistenco — an industrial park near Mexico City. And he knew that any U.S. workers displaced by it have a right to government-paid career counseling and retraining, thanks to a sweetener added to get members of Congress to approve the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Usually, companies cooperate with such requests for worker benefits. Freightliner, a subsidiary of German-owned DaimlerChrysler Corp., disagreed with the premise that the layoffs were trade-related and asked Kear to withdraw the petition.

Kear kept going. A Labor Department investigator sided with the union.

Right now, no Freightliner workers are actually using the benefits. All of the laid-off workers were recalled and are back at work.

But Kear is thinking ahead. Labor Department certification means the workers are entitled to benefits for any layoffs that occur up to two years afterward — through April 6, 2008. And Kear thinks production will drop at the beginning of 2007. More stringent federal requirements on vehicle emissions will take effect then, with the result that the company’s 2007 truck line will be more expensive, get lower fuel economy and require a higher, more expensive grade of diesel.

That means truck buyers are likely

to prefer the 2006 line, and may balk at the 2007 model.

If layoffs occur at that point, workers would get the retraining benefits with no delay. It’s no substitute for keeping a high-paid union manufacturing job, but it’s a pretty generous package: Job counseling; up to two years’ unemployment insurance benefits; a health care tax credit that pays two-thirds the cost of COBRA health insurance; a moving allowance if the worker needs to relocate to get a job; and up to \$20,000 to pay for school or up to \$10,000 in wage subsidy to employers willing to do on-the-job training.

Machinists are the largest of four unions at Freightliner’s Portland plant. But Teamster drivers, Service Employees janitors, and Painters and Allied Trades painters will also be eligible for benefits if laid off. So will non-union employees or managers.

For now, the plant is up and running, with 1,700 union employees turning out trucks on Swan Island in Portland.

LEGAL PROBLEMS??

For \$16 a month coverage includes:

- ❖ Unlimited toll-free phone consultation with attorneys.
- ❖ A comprehensive will with yearly updates is included.
- ❖ Representation for traffic tickets, accidents, criminal, and civil suits.
- ❖ Coverage on IRS tax audits.
- ❖ Divorce, child custody, bankruptcy and many more benefits.*

THESE LEGAL SERVICES ARE PROVIDED BY THE VERY BEST LAW FIRMS IN OREGON & WASHINGTON.

* Some services not 100% covered

For more information, call 503-760-2456 or toll-free at (888) 252-7930

www.prepaidlegal.com/info/randallnix

State legislators back increase in U.S. minimum wage

At the urging of the National Labor Caucus, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a bipartisan organization comprised of legislators from across the country, voted overwhelmingly April 8 to support a federal minimum wage increase.

“Oregon has shown the nation that we can have both fair wages and robust economic growth. I’m proud that our state is again leading the way,” said Oregon State Rep. Diane Rosenbaum, a member of Communications Workers of America Local 7901 and president of

the National Labor Caucus.

Oregon voters passed Measure 26 in 2002 to raise the state’s minimum wage and adjust it to reflect the increased cost of living. Rosenbaum was a sponsor of that legislation. “The real value of the federal minimum wage is at its lowest level since 1955 because it has not kept up with inflation,” Rosenbaum said. With rising gas and housing prices, working families are struggling. No one who works full time should be forced to live in poverty.”

The NCSL resolution commits the

lobbying group to support bills that have already been introduced at the federal level. Senate Bill 1062, introduced by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), and House Resolution 2429, introduced by Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.), were jointly introduced in May 2005, and would raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour in three steps.

The resolution includes opposition to a required tip credit for employers of tipped employees in states where the minimum wage rate is higher than the federal rate of \$5.15.

HEMORRHOIDS

The Non-Surgical Treatment

We specialize in the non-surgical treatment of hemorrhoids. For over 40 years people throughout the region have turned to the Sandy Blvd. Clinic for fast and effective relief. For more information, FREE consultation and/or a FREE informative booklet call:

Write or call for a FREE information booklet and/or a FREE consultation.

(503) 232-7609
THE SANDY BLVD. RECTAL CLINIC PORTLAND

Steven G. Cranford, DC, ND
FORMERLY THE BEAL-OLIVER CLINIC
CHIROPRACTIC/NATUROPATHIC PHYSICIANS
2026 NE SANDY BLVD., PORTLAND, OR 97232

Insurance accepted/pre authorization required.