

Working America signing up workers for health insurance

Oregon's new online insurance exchange may be broken, but the AFL-CIO is moving ahead to sign up uninsured individuals for health insurance through its community group Working America.

Working America regional mobilization director Kim McMurray says the group has signed up 600 people so far in Oregon, including taxi drivers with Union Cab and employees of several restaurants. Working America has also held several enrollment fairs in the basement of the Oregon AFL-CIO offices — in which individuals meet in person with insurance brokers chosen by the group.

The local effort is part of a national campaign by Working America, in partnership with the UnionPlus benefits program. Individuals who sign up for individual health insurance through

Working America become members of Working America, and have access to a free 24-7 phone service to help schedule doctors appointments.

McMurray said the group hopes the effort will help build relationships with food service workers in particular. A Working America member coordinator has been reaching out to restaurant owners, and the group sends brokers out to sign employees up for coverage. Oven and Shaker restaurant will be the next to hold an enrollment event, Jan. 7.

The next open-to-the-public event will be Jan. 13 at the Radio Room, 1101 NE Alberta St., Portland. Sign-up for the event is online at www.workingamericahealthcare.com.

Because of delays in the rollout, the deadline for uninsured individuals to enroll for 2014 has been extended until March 31.

Oregon AFL-CIO hires Nafisah Ula to bolster union organizing

The Oregon AFL-CIO has hired a research specialist to augment its organizing program. Nafisah Ula was recruited to the state labor federation from the national AFL-CIO's Center for Strategic Research, where she spent two-and-a-half years doing research to help affiliated unions organize new members. She'll do similar work in Oregon — researching the structure of private sector companies, for instance, identifying who the decision-makers are, and helping workplace organizers build lists of workers.

Ula, 27, grew up in Laramie, Wyoming, a daughter of immigrants from Bangladesh. From an early age, she noticed and was bothered by economic inequality. At University of

Michigan Ann Arbor, she became an activist for racial and economic justice, and spent summers working for the labor movement. She conducted research for the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center in Durban, South Africa in conjunction with United Students Against Sweatshops. And she served as an apprentice organizer with UNITE HERE in a food service worker campaign in San Jose. After earning a bachelor's degree in sociology from University of Michigan and a masters degree in political theory from the University of Chicago, she interned at the Workers Rights Consortium, an international labor rights monitoring group and then went to work as a researcher for Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, a 120,000 member union of janitors and security guards. She joined the national AFL-CIO in January 2011.

National Labor College in Silver Spring, Md. will close in April

SILVER SPRING, Md. (PAI) — The National Labor College (NLC) in Silver Spring, Maryland — the only college in the United States with an exclusive mission to serve the educational needs of the labor movement — will close this year because of financial difficulties.

"I am deeply saddened to report that the Board of Trustees directed me and the college's officers to develop a plan to close the college," the institution's president, Dr. Paula Peinovich, said in a statement posted on its website. "The college has been facing significant financial difficulties, and the board reluctantly decided to accept the inevitability of our closure."

Peinovich said NLC will offer a spring semester from Jan. 6 to April 18, 2014, with a full range of courses for the 260 students already registered. [Last fall the college had 599 online students.] The college still is exploring the option of an 18 month teach-out, whereby students could take courses at other institutions and transfer them back to NLC.

NLC will hold a commencement and closing convocation ceremony on April 26, 2014.

The labor college has been an independent, degree-granting institution for 17 years, tracing its history back to the George Meany Center for Labor Studies.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Peinovich said the college became burdened by debt incurred in a major renovation at its 47-acre campus that began in 2003. Part of that renovation included the construction of a 72,000-square-foot conference center named for Lane Kirkland, the late AFL-CIO president.

The center, dedicated in 2007, was unable to generate enough revenue to

erase the debt, Peinovich said, and even failed to cover its own operating costs.

Peinovich, who came out of retirement to run NLC after previously running a private for-profit online college, said the college owed about \$30 million when she took over in 2010.

At the time of her hiring, she was the college's fourth president in five years.

There had also been high turnover in other top administrative offices.

NLC employed 58 faculty and staff members and had an annual operating budget of \$12 million, Peinovich said. Most of the full-time faculty, represented by the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild, took buyouts when the college offered them. The Guild also represents part-time faculty there. The AFL-CIO and individual unions are the college's primary financial support, with the labor federation contributing about \$5 million a year. The AFL-CIO also has provided bridge loans to the college in recent years.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka told the federation's Executive

Council during a meeting at the college several years ago that the fed could not continue subsidizing the NLC. Trumka also chairs the college's board of trustees.

In 2012, trustees put the campus up for sale and planned to make the college an entirely online institution.

The Washington Post reported Dec. 19 that college trustees had approved a letter of intent to sell the 47-acre campus to Monument Realty. A sale price has not been announced, but proceeds will help cover the college's debts.

Oregon's minimum wage increased to \$9.10 an hour on Jan. 1, 2014



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