

Protesters take insurance giant to task over GOP health care bill

Disabled activist, allies, hold Regence BlueCross BlueShield accountable for donations to proponents of the plan

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

A group of about 20 disabled activists and their allies and service providers stormed Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon in downtown Portland Monday to deliver a receipt for the millions of Americans that would lose coverage under the Republican health care bill.

The receipt tallied campaign donations the insurance company's federation, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, made to Republican members of Congress charged with drafting the health care bill that would replace the Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare."

According to the Congressional Budget Office, 22 million people will lose their health care coverage over the next 10 years if the bill passes. This includes 15 million people on Medicaid, which covers disabled and elderly Americans who have no other resources to pay for health coverage.

Allen Hines and Maig Bergio are the organizers behind Monday's demonstration and the activists leading the Coverage Defense Committee.

The committee is a group of Portlanders who either receive Medicaid and Medicare services or provide those services to the people who need them.

Hines, a quadriplegic, said that if the GOP health care plan passes, he'd lose services he's come to rely on.

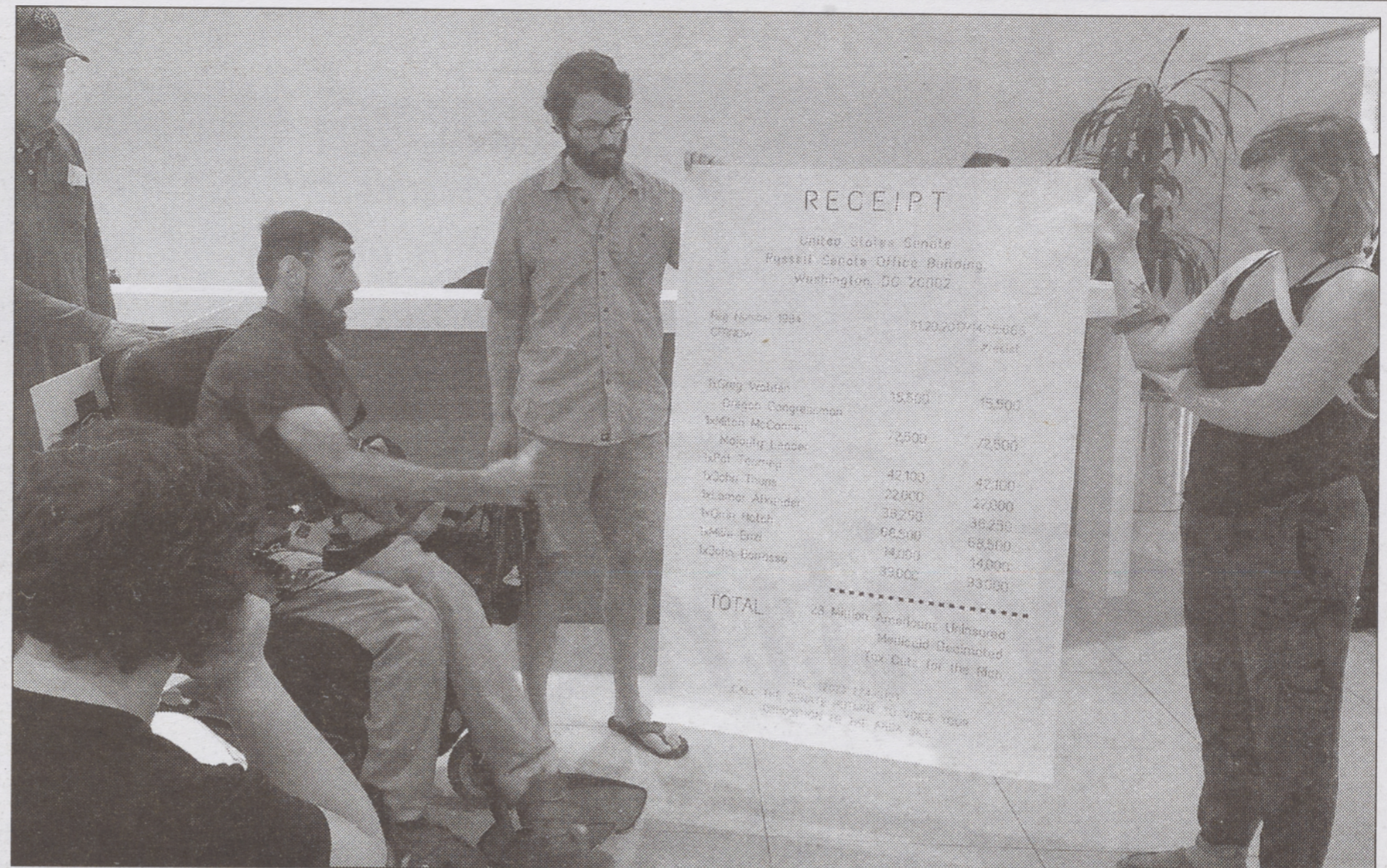
Under Obamacare's Medicaid expansion, many Oregonians with disabilities began to receive in-home services from care providers that were previously inaccessible to them. Many of these services greatly improve their quality of life while allowing them to remain in their homes.

If that expansion is rolled back under congressional Republicans' bill, many of the attendees at Monday's protest fear those services will be taken away, forcing people with disabilities into institutional living situations or worse — dying from lack of health care.

That was the message behind the receipt activists were delivering to Regence BlueCross BlueShield and Cambia Health Solutions, of which Regence is a subsidiary.

"Cambia was one of the top five spenders against Measure 97," said Hyung Nam, a social studies teacher attending the demonstration.

Cambia Health Solutions donated \$550,000



PHOTOS BY EMILY GREEN

Allen Hines, seated, delivers a message along with a receipt for the millions of people expected to lose insurance under the GOP health plan to Regence BlueCross BlueShield, which has donated to the campaigns of many of the plan's authors. Below, a protester outside Regence notes the support by pharmaceutical companies to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a champion of the GOP health care bill.

to defeat Measure 97, a corporate tax that would have gone, in part, to fund health care.

"I work with a lot of people to receive support in the home," Hines said. "With the state budget deficit and AHCA, we may be facing a lot of cuts to services."

Tess Raunig also fears losing services.

Raunig appeared at the demonstration in a wheelchair carrying a sign that said, "Choose people over profits."

Until about two years ago, Raunig spent hours each day on personal care tasks. But after going through a long and extensive qualification process, Raunig was able to get help with transportation to doctor appointments, cooking, cleaning and personal care.

If Obamacare is replaced with the GOP health care plan, Raunig fears in-home service providers will be replaced with nursing home living.

"I'm too young to live in a nursing home," Raunig said. "It's proven it's cheaper to have people living in their own homes with community support."

Once inside the lobby of the building that houses Regence at 100 SW Market St., Hines and Bergio asked the reception desk if someone from the insurance company could be called to come down and receive the receipt.

After protesters waited for about 10 to 15 minutes, a security guard informed them that they needed to wait outside of the building, but they refused to leave.

Protesters attempted to give the security guard the receipt, but he refused to take it.

When activists said they would be happy to come back another day when someone from Regence would be available to talk to them, the guard said he could take down a phone number and someone from Regence would call them. But the activists said they needed to deliver the receipt.

The security guard said he would have no choice but to call the police.

The group waited, but instead of police showing up to arrest a small group of disabled activists, three in wheelchairs, and their allies, Regence's media spokesperson, Jared Ishkanian, came down to listen to the group.

Ishkanian took the receipt, and after listening to a heartfelt plea from Hines, said he would share the group's message with Regence.

On the receipt the activists presented, they included donations made to U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (R-Oregon). Since 2014, Cambia and Regence has donated \$12,500 to the congressman representing Eastern Oregon.

Ishkanian clarified in an email to Street Roots that dollar amounts corresponding with U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and others listed on the receipt he was presented with do not represent what Cambia Health Solutions and Regence donated to the politicians.

Blue Cross Blue Shield is largest payer group in the U.S., consisting of dozens of independent, locally-operated franchises. These companies have various political action committees across the country bearing the Blue Cross Blue Shield name.

While Blue Cross Blue Shield has donated \$72,500 to McConnell, he received just \$2,500 in donations directly from Cambia Health Solutions, according to OpenSecrets.org.

McConnell's top industry donors include pharmaceuticals and health products (\$387,701) and hospitals and nursing homes (\$353,700), according to FollowTheMoney.org. He also, however, has more than \$15 million in "uncoded" contributions, which are unknown or not yet assigned contributions.

Ishkanian did not respond to a request for Cambia and Regence's position on the GOP health care plan by press time.

emily@streetroots.org

