

Oakland Forum Focuses on Crisis in Health Care

by Josh Richman

Published in *The Oakland Tribune*

March 26, 2006

OAKLAND -- One by one they stepped up to the microphone to tell horror stories of how they'd fallen through the cracks when they needed help most.

One woman had been 19, single and pregnant without access to any prenatal care. Another's asthmatic 2-year-old son and elderly father with emphysema now struggle to get even minimal care. And another went five months from breast-cancer diagnosis to treatment for lack of insurance.

These and many other testimonies were given Saturday at a citizens' hearing and "truth commission" meeting on Alameda County's health crisis. About 150 gathered at Laney College to share tales and discuss how to ensure people aren't left sick, in pain or dying for want of adequate health care.

"It's both a shame and an abomination that we have even one person without health care in America today," said Ethel Scott-Long, executive director of the Women's Economic Agenda Project, which co-sponsored the event with several community groups and labor unions.

Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, said, "It's very seldom that you hear the truth in Washington, D.C. ... But we know that telling the truth is what will take our country in the direction of liberty and justice for all."

Both Lee and Dr. Anthony Iton, the Alameda County public health officer, described how communities of color here and across the nation are disproportionately uninsured, and so suffer higher disease and mortality rates.

Baltimore-born Iton grew up in Canada where "you are a citizen and therefore you're entitled to health care," he said. "In the United States, all bets are off. ... If you don't have wealth, you don't have health. It's the law in this country."

Alameda County, although relatively progressive in health care, still provides only "a safety net designed to catch people so they don't die on the street," Iton said. Yet covering everyone under a single-payer health plan would cost less than the county now pays on last-minute emergency room care for the indigent.

"It's not about the policy, it's about the politics," he said. "This is a political movement. ... We need power with our truth to give us justice."

Closing the health care cap requires addressing housing, education, employment, transportation and other issues, Iton added. "If we don't address inequities across that entire spectrum, we will always have health care disparities."

Lee spoke about bills, such as HR 676 by Rep. John Conyers, D- Mich., that would provide comprehensive health insurance coverage for all U.S. residents through a publicly funded, privately delivered system based on an expansion and improvement of Medicare. With 68 co-sponsors, including Lee and other Bay Area lawmakers, it's pending before several House health subcommittees.

Lee's own HR 3000 would create an entirely new U.S. Health Service to provide health care and supplemental services to all residents.

Those testifying Saturday said a change is long overdue.

Rosie Kreidler, 61, said a traffic accident two years ago not only shattered her body but left her with a mountain of health care debt that forced her out onto the street. She now lives in a homeless shelter on San Pablo Avenue in Oakland.

"What happened to me -- I don't care who you are -- it can happen to you," she testified. "You end up in a hell of nothingness and these (insurance and pharmaceutical) companies get richer and richer."