

The Shame of the Nation: Why We Need Better Health Care and How to Get It

By Ethel Long-Scott, WEAP
San Francisco Bay View
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Join your sisters Saturday, 10am-2pm, Laney College Forum Building, 900 Fallon St., Oakland

This month millions will watch “Miracle Workers,” ABC’s newest reality show, where dedicated professionals provide quality care to a select few “deserving” cases who cannot afford it. The four-year-old with the life shortening spine problem. The blind father who will see his children for the first time – all “miracles” that should be commonplace care for everyone, every day

Across our nation, up to 100 million people are being left sick, stressed-out and in pain because of inadequate health care. Many of these conditions are confounded and in many cases caused by living with inadequate housing, low wage jobs, malnutrition – all problems easily addressed if we prioritized our domestic needs.

The failure of this nation to invest in its people was brought home in shocking clarity when we all watched the tragic events in the Gulf last year. Neglected levees burst, drowning thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands. Now, imagine one hundred million more abandoned by a system that refuses to do as virtually every other industrialized nation has done worldwide: provide adequate healthcare and basic living conditions for all of its residents.

On Saturday, March 25, hundreds of Alameda County residents, health workers, organized labor and other concerned folk are coming together to discuss how poverty and the health crisis is affecting our communities and what can be done to make a difference.

The hearings represent an unprecedented collaboration between organized labor, low wage and no wage workers of all colors around shared interests in economic and health justice. “We are all in the same boat,” says SEIU 790 Education Director Karega Hart. “The system hurts health workers. It hurts patients, and it hurts low-income communities even more. These hearings are a way of telling our stories so that those in power can hear them.” “Making the invisible visible,” says Nancy Lewis from California Nurses Association and SEIU 790. “It’s about forging solutions.”

We don’t have to settle for horror stories like what happened to Portia Anderson, an Oakland breast cancer survivor whose job provided no health insurance. She grew increasingly frightened as private medical agencies kept insisting, month after month, that she would have to pay for them to examine a growing lump in a breast. Every step

along the way the demand for money was put over what she needed to save her life.

Ultimately it would be a women's health clinic who took her in and referred her to a public hospital. In her story on our website, she notes a five-month delay between getting diagnosed and getting treated. "Had the cancer been very aggressive, I would probably not still be alive," she said.

More than 50 years ago, the United Nations declared adequate health care to be a fundamental human right. It is the responsibility of governments to make sure that people can claim their rights. The right to health means access to medical care, an adequate standard of living and a clean, safe environment. The United States is not meeting that responsibility.

Countries like Canada and Australia spend less than half of what the U.S. spends per capita on health and are statistically healthier. The republic of Korea and Costa Rica, countries with fewer resources and a lower average standard of living, achieve comparable health indices on well below \$1,000 annually per person. In the richest nation the world has ever known, health and health care are getting worse, and as employers cut health coverage, the number of uninsured grows.

In our most impoverished communities from San Diego to Redding access to preventive health care has been cut off. More and more of us realize that this is a life and death crisis. Martha Kuhl, board member from the California Nurses Association, is hopeful. "We are coming together to discuss and promote important solutions such as H.R. 676. The time is now for us to work together for a future that brings everybody in and leaves no one out."

Ethel Long-Scott is executive director of Women's Economic Agenda Project, www.weap.org. WEAP is also the host and coordinator of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign. She invites everyone to the Citizens' Hearing on Alameda County's Health Care Crisis, Saturday, March 25, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., at the Forum Building at Laney College, 10th Street entrance, 900 Fallon St., Oakland. Congresswoman Barbara Lee will open the event. For information, call (510) 451-7379.