

Testimony of John Dodds

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Before the House Policy Committee

September 25, 2008

My name is John Dodds. I am Director of the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, a non profit organization that assists unemployed and low wage workers. We are part of the Pennsylvania Health Access Network, which is working to make quality health care available to all in this state. The Philadelphia Unemployment Project has been in existence since 1975 and the issue of a lack of health insurance has been an important problem for our constituents for all these years. In fact the problem has gotten worse since then as costs have soared, more and more employers have cut back on insurance coverage and the state has eliminated some public health benefits. 71% of the uninsured in this nation are employed, but have no coverage. Over that time there have been efforts to do something about the situation that allows millions to be uninsured in this country. There seem to be times when change is possible, like in the early 1990s when the Clinton administration attempted to reform health care but were defeated by the insurance industry and the complexity of their plan and in the late 1990s when tobacco settlement funds became available to the states and Pennsylvania used 30% of the funds coming to Pennsylvania to create the adultBasic insurance program.

We currently are at one of those times when the opportunity to make a real advance is at hand. The Governor of this state made covering all Pennsylvanians a top priority in February of 2007. He had just been

reelected in a land slide and polls showed that the people of Pennsylvania and the nation, by substantial numbers, supported making sure that our citizens would have health insurance. He proposed a plan to Cover All Pennsylvanians and in March the state House passed a version of his proposal that would provide affordable health insurance to hundreds of thousands of uninsured Pennsylvanians. It would also provide prescription coverage to those on the adultBasic program and draw down federal dollars for all those covered under the new Access to Basic Care program, or ABC. We are now coming down to the wire on this opportunity with few session days remaining to get this program enacted into law. If we allow this opportunity to pass how long before another opportunity will occur to offer coverage to our uninsured citizens? It is time for the Senate to move this important legislation into law and begin to reduce the numbers of uninsured in our state.

This is something the people want to happen. Polls in September 2007 showed that 66% of Pennsylvanians supported the Governor's Prescription for Pennsylvania. 65% supported increasing taxes on tobacco products to pay for health insurance for adults in the state. 46% of Republicans said they would pay more in taxes to ensure that everyone would have insurance. So why don't we have a bill?

This is not a frill. It is a matter of life or death. A recent study found that approximately 710 people died in Pennsylvania in 2006 due to a lack of health coverage, nearly two each day. The uninsured go without screenings and preventative care. They often forego or delay needed medical care and they are sicker and die earlier than those with insurance. Particularly older people are at much greater risk of premature death. The third leading cause of death for Americans between 55 and 64 is the lack of insurance, following only heart disease and cancer.

And now we are heading into a recession. Unemployment is rising and the entire economy is in crisis. Unemployment is a lagging indicator in a recession, meaning that people get laid off after the stock market has gone down and the economy slowed. As sales become sluggish and consumers stop buying companies begin to lay off. This means that unemployment very probably will go up substantially in the months ahead. Those people who lose their jobs will lose their health coverage. Few will be able to afford COBRA payments at a time when their income is cut in half as they go onto unemployment compensation. What will the state do to help these workers and families? Normally the state does nothing when the crisis of recession hits. But now we have the opportunity to offer a safety net in the form of low cost health insurance through the ABC program to workers caught up in the fall out of the fiscal crisis created on Wall Street.

And we don't have to raise taxes to do it. We will use existing tobacco settlement and Community Health Reinvestment dollars. We have a large surplus in the MCARE fund that helps Doctors pay their malpractice insurance. Those funds can and should be used to continue to help the Doctors and also to be the basis for funding health insurance for the uninsured. We will be able to access federal funds by improving our current adultBasic program by adding prescription drugs. We are going into an economic crisis in this nation which will engulf Pennsylvania too and we should be trying to protect our citizens. Offering them health insurance is surely an important way to do that.

We also support increasing funding for public health centers, but in no way see expanding clinics as a substitute for real health insurance. PUP has fought hard to protect public health centers in Philadelphia and they offer quality care, but waiting times remain long and to get care many have to arrive by 7 AM and wait for hours for the triage nurse see them to hopefully get treatment. People need and deserve better than that and we can make it happen right now in this state. It is time for the Senate to act and join with you in the House to move a major step in the direction of offering health insurance to our uninsured citizens. I know that many of you on this panel have worked hard to make this happen and we thank you for your efforts. Those who have stood in the way should be remembered on Election Day

and many of us will be doing our best to make sure that the voters know.

Thank you.