

Testimony to Senate Health & Welfare on S120
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Thank you, Senators, for listening to me today; special thanks to Sen. Lyons for inviting me. As most of you know, after four years in the Senate on this very committee, I have returned full-time to my role as Executive Director of Vermont Interfaith Action. VIA is a faith-based, grassroots community organizing group comprised of 68 member and affiliated congregations, primarily in five regions, the greater Burlington area, Central Vermont, the Upper Valley, Brattleboro, and Bennington. Our congregations collectively include some 15,000 Vermonters.

For the 14 years that I've been at VIA, making health care as affordable and accessible as possible for all Vermonters and Americans has been one of our top issues. At the state level, our leaders helped to get the Catamount Health Care passed and signed by Gov. Douglas, and we were strong supporters of Act 48 and the proposed single payer system. At the federal level, working with sister affiliates in other states through the national network that VIA belongs to, we were strong proponents of reauthorizing SCHIP twice and of the Affordable Care Act.

Therefore, VIA volunteers are no strangers to comprehensive health care reform that aims to create universal coverage at a cost that everyday individuals and families can afford. Since the advent of the pandemic, like everyone else, we are aware both of the gaps in our current systems and the unprecedented opportunities that were seized upon to address this once-in-a-lifetime health crisis. To the volunteers that I work with, now seems like the best time in a long time to take bold steps and make strides toward reform once again.

When Peter Sterling brought the idea of forming a commission and launching a statewide series of public listening sessions to VIA, our Board jumped at endorsing it. Although truly we would like to see a universal, single payer system – a “Medicare for all” model -- instituted not only in Vermont but also in the entire country tomorrow, we know of course that this will not come to fruition instantly. And whether what can be accomplished in the next few years is this kind of radical reform, or perhaps just a universal primary care system, or an expansion of Medicare or Medicaid for new age cohorts or income levels, we need to take at least some small steps in the interim.

In VIA's opinion, what we need to do right now is fourfold:

1. Signal to Vermonters that we know their health care is still inadequate and unaffordable and that we care.
2. Listen to Vermonters to hear what they consider to be the top priorities to improve their health care.
3. Give a new group of legislators the opportunity to dive in deeply to key concepts in health care reform to increase their understanding of possible solutions.
4. Demonstrate to the Biden Administration that Vermont is ready and willing to consider some of the concepts that the President campaigned on, like a public option for insurance and lowering the age of Medicare eligibility.

VIA believes that S120 as written meets all those objectives. The structure of holding a series of public hearings across the state is strongly within VIA's wheelhouse of hearing from folks at the grassroots so that their ideas and contributions are taken into consideration when forming solutions.

And although we'd like to see one key legislator serve as the chair of the bill's proposed new commission – someone who, perhaps like Sen. Lyons, has extensive knowledge of health care reform – we would also like to create opportunities for learning for legislators who are not overburdened by the responsibilities of serving as committee chairs. This new S120 Commission provides those opportunities.

Lastly, S120 provides for a knowledgeable coordinator who can help the new commission set up the public meetings and navigate the reform possibilities, including those that the Biden Administration has brought into the public discourse.

Senators, since time is short to get this bill out of committee, passed on the Senate floor and over to the House, Vermont Interfaith Action urges you to pass S120 without delay so that the crucial task of health care reform can take one more important step forward.