

Free health screening in Detroit draws thousands

A WSWWS reporting team
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Thousands of workers, retirees and unemployed people attended the annual Free Health Expo for the uninsured held Tuesday at Cobo Convention Center in Detroit. The event, sponsored by the Wayne County Department of Health and Human Services, offered health screenings for a number of conditions including blood pressure, cholesterol, cancer, diabetes, dental, HIV/AIDS and vision.

Edith Killins, Wayne County director of health and human services, told the WSWWS that she expected no fewer than 3,000 to turn out for the event. She indicated there were more than 350,000 residents of Wayne County, which encompasses the city of Detroit and its western suburbs, without health insurance. Approximately 1 million people statewide live without health insurance.

There was only limited publicity for the health screening, which reached only a tiny fraction of area residents lacking health insurance. The event served as a photo op for Wayne County executive Robert Ficano and various corporate sponsors including health insurers such as Henry Ford Health Systems and UnitedHealthcare. The health insurers saw the event as an opportunity to court potential new customers. Under provisions of the Affordable Health Care Act (ObamaCare) set to go into effect next January, those without health insurance will be subject to penalties.

According to Killins, the health screening revealed a staggering level of untreated health care issues facing the uninsured. “The nurses are amazed that people are walking around and haven’t already had a stroke. There are people that are at stroke level. Some have hypertension so high they can have a heart attack any moment. We see people whose glucose levels are extremely high, and their bodies aren’t making insulin properly.”

When asked about the impact of social decay on healthcare, Killins noted that “Unemployment being on the rise in our county certainly impacts the number of people who do not have health insurance. I would have to say just upon the attendance that we have seen a rise in the number of people without it.

“The emergency rooms in the Wayne County area have exceeded over \$750 million in uncompensated care because people are going to the emergency room for routine preventive treatment.”

The Michigan Department of Community Health reports that the majority of those lacking health insurance in the state come from households headed by a person who is working full- or part-time for the entire year. Of young adults, aged 18-34, 24.4 percent are uninsured. Across the state, the percentage of nonelderly residents with coverage through employers or a family member’s job fell from 78.1 percent in 2000 to 62.9 percent in 2010.

A wide range of people turned out for the event, including both those who were totally uninsured and those whose existing health plans do not provide comprehensive coverage.

Darlene Griffin, a former Detroit city worker who currently is on disability, had been waiting for three hours for a dental screening when she spoke to the WSWWS. “I am number 160 and they are on 32, so I have a long way to go. They are understaffed, but they are doing the best they can.

“I am here for teeth cleaning and a dental exam. I have Medicaid, but the state of Michigan cut out dental coverage, and I really need it. I have a lower tooth on the right side where the whole inside of the tooth came out, and it is bleeding. I am here to see if they can save what’s left of it.

“I feel if we pay taxes, we should at least have some

kind of dental and medical. It is a basic need. For a healthy society, you need to have the option to go to a doctor no matter your race, creed, or color. This is supposed to be a land of opportunity. But they keep taking and taking from the little guy. We are in a situation now where you need a job-and-a-half to make ends meet.”

John, a retired Detroit newspaper worker, said his existing health coverage was inadequate to meet his needs. “I got health benefits from the newspapers, but it is useless, so I go to all the free clinics.

“My health insurance kept eroding. Back in 2000, I had a hospital bill for \$11,000. My wife is retired from St. John’s Health Systems and doesn’t have health care.

“I am a Vietnam veteran and I go to the Veterans Administration for free treatment for exposure to Agent Orange. I also go to neighborhood clinics for the uninsured.

“You can’t find an industrial country in the world that doesn’t have some kind of universal health care. I don’t think you would find anyone in the medical field who wasn’t for it except the lobbyists.”

A young mother told the WSWS she was married with two children but lacked health insurance. “My husband works, but the cost of insurance is too much to cover all of us. I have been without insurance since my job ended in 2009. I worked at a project management office with our company. They offered COBRA, but I opted not to enroll because it was too expensive. It has been two years since I have been to a doctor. It is not a good feeling.”

Garner, a retired worker, was at the health expo to sign up for low-income health insurance. “I used to work in the building trades, so I didn’t have insurance from work. I had to get my own insurance. But now I’m unemployed, so I have to come here.

“Instead of getting decent care, like everybody should have, I’m here for three hours waiting for a simple blood pressure test and to sign up for the low-income health insurance. I’m glad that the screenings occur, but health care should be affordable to all.”



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