

West Virginia journalist arrested after questioning Secretary of Health and Human Services

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Contempt for reporters is a trademark of many elected officials who simply ignore questions they don't want to answer --no matter how many times they are asked.

But in a new era of hostility to the press ushered in by President Donald Trump, members of his administration do not want to be bothered with even having to ignore the press.

Veteran West Virginia journalist Dan Heyman learned that lesson Tuesday night when he was arrested, handcuffed and hustled off by police. He made the mistake of asking Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price more than once a question about the administration's proposed new healthcare bill and the possibility of domestic violence being considered a pre-existing condition.

The Trump administration's American Health Care Act (AHCA), as passed by the House last week, would apparently not allow insurance companies to outright refuse to cover pre-existing conditions, but would allow them to charge more for coverage; effectively eliminating coverage for the many if not most American workers with pre-existing conditions like cancer, diabetes, and more.

Passed by the House of Representatives as a replacement for Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA), known as Obamacare, it now awaits action by the Senate.

Heyman, a veteran journalist with Public News Service, was charged with "willful disruption of state government processes" when he persisted in asking for a response from Price as the HHS secretary walked through the state capitol in Charleston, West Virginia.

Price was in Charleston with Kellyanne Conway,

special counsel to President Trump, to discuss the state's opioid addiction epidemic which has produced the highest drug overdose death rate in the nation.

"This is my job, this is what I'm supposed to do," said Heyman, who was released on a punitive \$5,000 bond. "I think it's a question that deserves to be answered. I think it's my job to ask questions and I think it's my job to try to get answers."

Public News Service founder and chief executive Lark Corbeil defended the efforts of his reporter to do just that.

"From what we can understand, he did nothing out of the ordinary," Corbeil told the *Washington Post*. "He was doing what any journalist would normally do, calling out a question and trying to get an answer."

The American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia called Heyman's arrest a "dark day for Democracy" and a "blatant attempt to chill an independent, free press."

Heyman's arrest did not take place in a vacuum. Trump has created a hostile environment, declaring that any criticism of his administration is "fake news" produced by a media that he has deemed the "enemy of the people."

As the World Socialist Web Site previously reported, at a recent press briefing by Trump's Press Secretary Sean Spicer, reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the BBC and CNN were barred from attending

"The media responded with typical cowardice," the WSWs noted. "The White House Correspondents' Association issued a statement of protest lamely declaring that it would be 'discussing this further with White House staff.'"

Little wonder that a West Virginia reporter with less

august credentials would face jail time while the Washington press corps rolls on its back and whimpers.

The general public does not even have to ask a question to face jail.

Earlier this year a woman with a group of Code Pink protesters was arrested for laughing briefly at comments made in support of then Attorney General nominee Jeff Sessions.

Desiree Fairouz from Texas was charged with disorderly and disruptive conduct for laughing in the confirmation hearing when Alabama Senator Richard Shelby said Sessions' political record of "treating all Americans equally under the law is clear and well documented."

"Americans should be outraged that for two seconds of laughter during a public hearing, one could get jail time," Fairouz, a retired children's librarian, told reporters. "What does this say about the state of free speech in this country."

As far as is known, Heyman's question has not received an answer although it deserves one.

A 2014 study titled "Insurance Discrimination Against Victims of Domestic Violence" documented many cases where insurance companies had in the past treated domestic violence and its consequences as pre-existing conditions and exempt from coverage.

"Considering that approximately 1.5 million women in the United States are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually, resulting in an average of 486,151 emergency room visits per year, the reported extent to which insurers use domestic violence as an underwriting criterion potentially impacts a significant number of people," the report published by the National Health Resources Center on Domestic Violence and the Women's Law Project noted.



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