

Western PA Coalition for Single-Payer Healthcare

www.WPaSinglePayer.org

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Medicare Birthday Celebration Calls for Protection of Social Safety Net

PITTSBURGH, July 30—In honor of the 45th anniversary of Medicare, The Western PA Coalition for Single-Payer Healthcare joined forces with State Senator Jim Ferlo, the PA Alliance of Retired Americans (ARA), Healthcare for All PA, the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, Physicians for a National Health Program, the United Steel Workers, the PA Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees, and other unions and community groups to send a message to elected officials and candidates to protect our social safety net. The event, billed as a Medicare Birthday Party, took place at noon in the courtyard of the Allegheny County Courthouse in downtown Pittsburgh.

This year's event was marked by concern over upcoming recommendations of the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, aka the Deficit Commission. President Obama formed the 18-member committee by Executive Order in February 2010 and tasked the group with presenting recommendations by December 1st on ways to reduce the deficit by 2015, indicating that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid were "on the table" for consideration of cuts. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi have promised an up or down vote on the recommendations presented.

Given the overwhelmingly right wing composition of the Commission and the support of a Democratic president, many worry that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are at greater risk now than ever before. Senator Ferlo, in addressing this threat, said, "any recommendation that the Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform might make to reduce Medicare and Social Security benefits would turn back the clock on decades of progress and success. We need to expand these programs and reject anything to the contrary." Sandy Fox, president of the Western PA Coalition for Single-Payer Healthcare, concurred, stating that "we fear the whittling away of our most cherished safety net—namely Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid—at a time when more, not less, is needed to protect us from abject poverty and premature death. We need to join in solidarity against these deficit hawks and say 'no way!' to cutting these life-saving programs."

Ana Malinow, M.D., immediate past president of Physicians for a National Health Program expressed outrage at the possible reduction in our safety net. "If you look back to July 1964, a year before the passage of Medicare, you will see that 50 percent of our seniors lived in poverty and only 40 percent had health insurance. In a short period after the passage of Medicare, 95 percent of seniors had health insurance and millions rose out of poverty. Instead of celebrating this remarkable achievement, we create a Deficit Commission that declares war on Medicare and Social Security. A Deficit Commission that wants to throw us back to 1964, to uninsured, indigent seniors. Instead of cannibalizing Medicare, we should be improving it. Instead of voucherizing Medicare, we should be expanding it. Improving and expanding Medicare for all is the best, indeed the only way, to safeguard the entire Program."

Jean Friday, president of the Pennsylvania ARA, voiced anger at the positions of right wing members of Congress calling for a reduction in the deficit while wanting to extend the Bush tax cuts for the rich. "While members

of the Deficit Commission have stated publicly that they intend to 'mess' with Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid to reduce the deficit, debates have begun in Congress about what to do with the Bush tax cuts that are set to expire at the end of this year. What hypocrisy!"

"Americans better wake up to the ideological struggle that is taking place," said David Hughes, executive director of Citizen Power, a regional public policy advocacy group. "There has been a decades-old, right wing attempt to unravel the 'New Deal.' Now, President Obama and the Democrats appear ready and willing to make the right's dream come closer to reality by putting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid on the butcher block, under the phony guise of cutting the deficit."

The event concluded with a march around the Courthouse, as signs were raised reading "Deficit Commission is the *Real* Death Panel," "No Cuts to Medicare and Social Security," and "Tax the Rich," among others.

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