

AARP Coffee & Conversation: Maine AllCare proposes Universal Health Care

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By Lorry Fleming

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BRUNSWICK — The next AARP Maine Coffee & Conversation event at Brunswick Landing on Wednesday, June 20, will tackle a topic of importance to many if not all Mainers: The status of Maine AllCare, an initiative giving shape to the possibility of publicly funded, universal healthcare in Maine.

The panel consists of retired physician Bill Clark, who heads the Brunswick chapter of Maine AllCare; Sen. Brownie Carson (D-Brunswick, Harpswell, Freeport, North Yarmouth and Pownal); and retired physician Dan Wood of Woolwich.

The event will begin with a short video explaining the public health care system in Sweden, and comparing it to the way health care works—or doesn't work—in the U.S. A public Q & A session will follow.

The conversation takes place at the Coastal Landing Retirement Center, 142 Neptune Drive, Brunswick Landing, at 11 a.m. As always, coffee and cookies will be served.

Maine AllCare is a chapter of Physicians for a National Health Plan, an organization with more than 20,000 physician members around the country advocating for a single-payer health plan.

Bill Clark was a practicing physician in Bath and director of the Addiction Resource Center in Brunswick before he retired in 2005. He also spent some years in Boston as a director at Cambridge Hospital and also taught at Harvard.

He has long been interested in public health and long believed that health care should be available "for the common good."

"We don't think health care should be a commodity. We think it should be a public service offered to everybody, like your fire department, your police department, your libraries," Clark said. "We are the only economically developed country that doesn't pay for health care. Strange, isn't it, when we're the richest?"

He points out states such as Vermont, California, New York, Minnesota and Washington, among others, where efforts similar to Maine AllCare are underway.

"Health care is currently seen as a commodity, which is therefore engaged in a profit-seeking venture," Clark said. "Everyone involved is trying to make money ... we don't think that's the right way to do it. We think it should be for the common good. That's what all other developed countries think."

Countries as large as France (66.9 million) and as small as Iceland ("about one third the population of Maine," Clark points out) provide health care for all their people.

The proposal for Maine is that every Mainer would be covered, "from the day they are born to the day they die. Coverage would include dental, vision and hearing. It would be run by an administrative group outside the legislative body, in the same manner the Maine turnpike is run," Clark said.

The plan would eliminate premiums, copays and deductibles. "Some 90 to 95 percent of people would save money compared to what they are now paying for healthcare," Clark said.

The key, he said, is educating people about the current costs of health care, and about how adjusting the tax rates in a progressive manner would cover the cost of a streamlined, single-payer plan similar to Medicare.

"Most people don't really understand what they are paying," Clark said.

"For someone insured through their employer, for example, there is a payroll deduction, which is money they never see; second, the employer pays at least an equal sum, which is money that could go into higher wages; third, all that money paid by big employers is not taxed by the

federal government, so it means our individual taxes are increased to pay for corporations who don't pay because they are paying for insurance. Further, we all pay for covering state and federal employees; we are paying for health care in ways we don't even know about."

Administrative costs in our current system are also many times higher than they are in single-payer systems. "It's difficult to find the billing department in a Canadian hospital, because it's one person and nobody ever goes there!"

Clark stresses that lowering those administrative costs could help bring more private medical practices to the state, and, most importantly, to rural areas that are hurting for doctors and medical centers.

Clark thinks it's important to speak to the retired demographic, like AARP members, because "everyone loves Medicare," and getting those people on board as supporters makes sense.

"People over 50 can't wait to get to 65 and get Medicare; it's the best plan in the country. We know how to do this already. We also have the VA, which is a more socialized system, and provides very good care to people. So, we already have a couple of models that show how to do this."

A "concept" bill in the Maine legislature last year received full support from both Democratic and Republican legislators, which resulted in a bi-partisan study group that is exploring options for crafting a piece of legislation.

Maine AllCare is raising funds from grants and small and private donors to support the mission of the group, with the goal being a report by year's end that could lead to legislation.

This AARP event will further discuss the mechanics of the program, with plenty of time for questions to be asked.

The last AARP Coffee & Conversation will be held on July 18. The topic is "Alternate Roads to Health and Healing."

Sandy Jaeger of Georgetown has been organizing these events for the past year, with help from her husband Ole and from Bath's Polly Shaw.

"It's been extremely rewarding for Polly, Ole and myself, because with each Coffee we always learned something important," she said. "We hope and believe we brought good information to the seniors who came each month."

Some of the more popular events included conversations with state legislators and congressional reps, a look at the burning of a Catholic church in Bath in 1854, and a discussion about legal services for the elderly.

"I think the AARP is now going to focus on a new 'Beer on Tap' program, as it attracts younger people and gets them to know about AARP," Jaeger said.

You do not need to be a member of AARP to attend any of these events. For more information on the Maine AllCare discussion on June 20, email or call Sandy Jaeger at 751- 4561.

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