

Citizens voice worries about health care

By Graham Moomaw
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For those wondering why political consensus on health care reform is proving so hard to come by, they would have witnessed an excellent case study by attending Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin's health care town hall meeting Monday night at Prince George's Community College.

Over 500 people packed the room to listen to Cardin speak about health care reform plans and to voice their own worries about the health care system and what is going to be done to fix it.

Cardin, standing in front of a blue banner that read, "All Americans Deserve Health Care," spoke

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BENJAMIN CARDIN
U.S. Senator

about the need for reform that would bring costs down and expand coverage to uninsured Americans.

"The only option that's not acceptable is the status quo," said Cardin.

The problem is, nobody can seem to agree on what options are acceptable and more importantly, how

to pay for them.

"For every suggestion we have to raise money, there's a problem on the other side," Cardin said.

He also spoke about the difficulty of reaching consensus even among the 60-vote Democratic majority in the Senate.

"Truth of the matter is, we don't

have 60 Democrats who think the same way on any one issue," Cardin said.

The audience didn't seem to be thinking the same way, either, when the floor was opened up for questions. Topics included health care for illegal immigrants, funding for abortions, steep malpractice insurance costs, and whether or not members of Congress would have to enroll in whatever public health care plan they create.

Two audience members in particular seized the opportunity to speak candidly to their elected representative, critiquing his policy positions from seemingly opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

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Robert Broadus, a programmer from Clinton, said he had recently lost his job and that he had opted to save money by not paying for a new health insurance plan. Broadus asked Cardin, "I want to know, are you going to tell me, an individual protected by the Constitution... that I have to buy health care or else you're going to fine me \$2,500 every year that I don't do that?"

The senator responded by saying that an "overriding public interest" was enough to justify requiring everyone to buy health insurance. He added that similar arguments have been made about requiring drivers to buy car insurance.

"Where does it say in the Constitution that I have the right to require you to have liability insurance? I don't see it written anywhere," Cardin said.

Broadus said that he believes the health insurance mandate is unconstitutional because it violates both the Ninth and 10th Amend-

ments.

Elizabeth Handy, a psychotherapist from Baltimore, was equally blunt when questioning Cardin about the single-payer route to universal coverage.

Handy said to Cardin: "My question is why isn't it on the table? Why do we have lobbyists to the tune of \$1,000 an hour being paid in Washington to pay our politicians to vote to support them and not the people? This is not people's health care. This is health care for big business and politicians."

Cardin responded by saying that he believed in private insurance and building a system that would allow people to keep their current plans if they so choose.

"Let me tell you that most people in America are satisfied with their private health insurance coverage," Cardin said. "The president is not supporting the single-payer and there is not the support in Congress to pass the single-payer."

Handy wasn't persuaded by his answer. "Sen. Cardin said there is a lot right with our system and that we

need to keep what is good," she said. "My issue is that I don't believe that there is much good in any system that creates as much disparity as ours."

Cardin began his speech by naming health care reform as a top priority, but after being peppered with tough questions from the audience, he ended up downplaying the solidity of the pending legislation.

"There is no plan today," he said. "I just urge you all to stay tuned. We don't have a bill yet."

When Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson arrived onstage near the end of the meeting for a brief statement, Cardin jokingly wished him luck with his "spirited" constituents.

Jackson said that health care reform is a tough issue for both the county and the nation, but it needs to be addressed.

"We're never going to reach consensus on all of the answers," he said. "But the one answer that we must reach consensus on is that we need change in the health care system."