

Vermont's Health Care Breakthrough

How a People's Movement Led to the Country's first Universal Health Care Law



**Vermont Workers'
Center, May 26, 2011**

What Vermont's People's Movement Has Achieved

After years of organizing by the *Healthcare Is a Human Right* Campaign, Vermont is now the first state...

- ✓ to pass a law for universal, publicly financed health care
- ✓ to embed human right to health care principles in law
- ✓ committed to providing health care as a public good



A Breakthrough *For* Human Rights



Vermont has created a path toward realizing

the “right to a system of health protection which provides equality of opportunity for people to enjoy the highest attainable level of health.”

International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
(Legal interpretation by UN Treaty Body in General Comment 14)

The Breakthrough

Overcoming the Market-Based System

Poor health outcomes in the U.S. are linked to a health care system that is...

- ❑ commercialized and privatized
→ not universal
- ❑ stratified → not equitable
- ❑ based on individualism
→ not accountable



The Breakthrough

A Breakthrough *With* Human Rights Principles



- ▶ **Universality:** Everyone is entitled to comprehensive, quality health care
- ▶ **Equity:** Everyone gets what they need and contributes what they can
- ▶ **Accountability:** The people oversee the provision of health care as a public good, shared by all

A Breakthrough *By* a People's Movement

The Vermont Workers' Center model: using human rights for

- ▶ organizing and movement building
- ▶ policy analysis and advocacy



The *Healthcare Is a Human Right* Campaign: What Did It Take?



- ✓ Openness to change
- ✓ Grassroots base-building
- ✓ Principled approach for systemic change
- ✓ Collective actions and solutions
- ✓ Human rights = people's needs + people's power

The Campaign

Human Rights and Grassroots Organizing

- ❑ **People-centered:** listening, surveying, peer education, storytelling, testifying
- ❑ **Unifying:** common ground, inclusive, democratic decision-making
- ❑ **Participatory:** bottom-up, organizing, mobilizing, “claiming rights”



Human Rights and Policy Advocacy



- ❑ Changing frame & discourse: health care as a collective right
- ❑ Agreeing principles: universality, equity, accountability, transparency, participation
- ❑ Developing policy: using human rights standards
- ❑ Building a legislative “People’s Team”: of, by, and for the people

The New Law for a Universal & Unified Health System

The state will create Green Mountain Care
“to provide, as a public good, comprehensive, affordable, high-quality, publicly financed health care coverage for all Vermont residents in a seamless and equitable manner regardless of income, assets, health status, or availability of health coverage.”

➡ **public good, universality, equity**

The state will *“achieve health care reform through the coordinated efforts of an independent board, state government, and the citizens of Vermont, with input from health care professionals, businesses, and members of the public.”*

➡ **accountability, transparency, participation**



Principled Wins

- ❑ **Universality:** all will be eligible, regardless of immigration status
- ❑ **Equity:** financing plan to be consistent with principle of equity
- ❑ **Accountability & Transparency:** human rights principles as basis for governance and implementation
- ❑ **Participation:** process for public input into decision-making
- ❑ **Public good:** health care to be provided as a public good



Human Rights Assessment of the New Law



- ❑ **Universality:** universal eligibility, but not until 2017, and not unless conditions are met
- ❑ **Equity in access:** in principle, but not during Exchange phase, and threatened if cost-sharing and coverage tiers (through continuation of private plans) are allowed
- ❑ **Equity in financing:** in principle, but financing mechanism not yet proposed



- ❑ **Accountability & Transparency:** Independent board is accountable to legislature and must act according to human rights standards – this must be ensured in practice
- ❑ **Participation:** public process, but unclear if board will have people's representative
- ❑ **Public good:** public financing, but subcontracted administration. Role of private insurance companies unclear

The Struggle Ahead



- ! Equitable financing
- ! Comprehensive benefits
- ! Studies, conditions, waivers
- ▶ Whose rights, whose voice, whose power?

From the Powers That Be...

- ❑ **Insurance industry:** *“it is a far cry from being implemented ... we won't be pushovers”* – Vermont Insurance Agents Association
- ❑ **Big business:** *“If it were a hockey game, we would say first period done”* – IBM
- ❑ **The governor:** If costs haven't been reduced by 2013, the Administration will *“rethink its plan to pursue a single payer system”* – VT Public Radio



...to the Power of the People



...through human rights organizing!

Because *human rights*...

- ❑ arise from people's needs
- ❑ prioritize needs of most disadvantaged
- ❑ offer principles and standards
- ❑ place people at the center of policy
- ❑ help shift power to the people

The Struggle Ahead