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Heated health care debate moves to Milwaukee

By [Mark Johnson](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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The nation's fierce health care debate drew a largely partisan crowd to the auditorium at North Division High School on Tuesday for a display of democratic dissent that was loud and impassioned, but for the most part, orderly.

Similar town hall-style forums on health care reform across the nation have devolved into raucous shouting matches, and the Milwaukee meeting organized by U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore (D-Milwaukee) was patrolled by two police officers, a federal marshal and volunteer security staff.

Residents cheered and booed and shouted "Liar!" and shushed one another. They waved signs saying "Health Care for America Now," and "Stop Socialism Now." They listened to a detailed discussion of the state of health care in America and the reform plan under discussion in the House of Representatives. And in the course of two hours, the people in attendance sometimes turned around in their seats to argue with their neighbors.

Despite high emotions and a crowd that came close to filling the room's 1,000-seat capacity, no one was ejected, according to Moore's staff.

"It's a democracy," the congresswoman declared afterwards. "It's the best system on the planet.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp. We were able to respect each other."

In general, Moore appeared to be on safe turf in a room filled with more supporters than opponents of President Barack Obama's health care reform plan.

"I got an e-mail because I'm an Obama supporter. I'm a strong supporter. I was part of his campaign," explained Clarence Nicholas, 62, who taught in the Milwaukee Public Schools for 36 years.

Many in the crowd carried fliers that read: "Standing Together for Health Insurance Reform." An e-mail from [WI.BarackObama.com](#) had encouraged friends to print out the fliers and display them at the meeting.

Out to air concerns

Others, however, came to voice their opposition.

"For me it's an informal session to see what I'm up against. My career, my livelihood is at stake," said Bryan Clayton, a Milwaukee man who works in sales for a health insurance company. "I was going to bring a sign that said, 'Am I the villain?'"

Clayton said he feared provisions for a government-run insurance plan to compete with private insurers would put people like him out of work.

Brittany Young, a 25-year-old MPS kindergarten teacher with type 1 diabetes, seemed to represent a much smaller group at Tuesday's forum, those more interested in listening than in defending their views. Young said she came to the meeting "for information." "I'll admit I'm not very well informed at this point."

Young said she hoped to learn more facts than opinions.

But even before the actual program began, the tension of opposing viewpoints threatened to boil over. As Jim Kieturkus, a 70-year-old retired firefighter, rose from his seat and pointed to the stage, those nearby him shouted "Take him out" and "Sit down." Kieturkus said he had only been trying to point out that the American flag was on the wrong side of the stage.

"Make a note," he said, "they were about to hang me for that."

After singing the national anthem and listening to a prayer "for openness and mutual respect," the crowd settled. The program began with the personal stories of two women who had struggled with the present health care system.

Then Tom Oliver, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Public Health, gave a primer on the health care system and the House reform bill. He said the U.S. ranks last among 13 advanced industrial nations in infant mortality and life expectancy. He said the nation now has well over 50 million people who are uninsured and quoted an analysis by the Institute of Medicine contending that lack of insurance results in the deaths of 20,000 Americans each year.

The crowd grew louder and more boisterous as Oliver described the proposed House bill. He said the bill would create no annual or lifetime limits to care and would forbid the unfair exclusion of people from health coverage when they become sick. When he mentioned the creation of a government-run insurance plan, as one option for consumers, there were shouts of "Yes! Yes! Yes!" from some and shouts of "No" and booing from others.

When he mentioned the surcharge for health care reform that would be imposed on the wealthiest 1.2% of the population, there were more loud cheers, an undercurrent of boos and a lone call of "Liar!" More shouts came when Oliver said that although the bill encourages doctors and patients to discuss living wills and end-of-care issues, "Nobody's going to be pulling the plug."

Moore answers questions

The congresswoman then answered questions that had been submitted electronically and finally questions from the audience. She told the audience, "No one is forcing anybody out of the health care coverage they currently have," to which one dissenter responded, "The government is." She said the House bill would not dictate to doctors what procedures they can or cannot perform on a specific patient.

Roman Larson, a 16-year-old from Mequon, said the Congressional Budget Office had projected that the

health care reform plan would drive up the national deficit and asked how the Democrats can make good on promises to reduce the deficit "if you're looking at one of the largest government spending plans in history?" Moore said government would reduce costs through efficiencies and would use the influx of newly insured residents to bargain for cost reductions from insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Later she added, "We're going to repeal those tax breaks for the wealthy," referring to tax policies of former President George W. Bush.

When the two hours finished, Clayton, the insurance company worker, declared himself disappointed: "It was all talking points. I appreciated the fact that she took questions from those opposed. She just didn't answer them."

Young expressed disappointment that "people were trying to share information, and other people were yelling. We should listen to each other." But she said she knew more now than she had at the beginning.

"I'm not an expert," Young said, "but I feel generally pretty sure about the different options out there."



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