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## Number of uninsured 'a family tragedy,' Jay says

By [Paul J. Nyden](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Speaking to a group of about 200 residents on Tuesday, U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller defended Democratic plans for health-care reform. He called the number of uninsured West Virginians a "tragedy."

Rockefeller, who heads the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Health Care, has long been an outspoken advocate of making sure all Americans have adequate health care.

"In West Virginia, we have 250,000 people who are uninsured and 100,000 who are underinsured. That is troubling. That is a family tragedy," he said.

The senator had strong words for health insurance and pharmaceutical companies.

"There are a whole lot of people making a whole lot of money off of health care which they should not be making," Rockefeller said. "The insurance industry is the shark that swims under the surface of the water that you don't see until you get bitten by it."

About 30 protesters stood outside the meeting, waving signs at passing motorists. They were not allowed to enter the forum at the University of Charleston.

If Congress passes the legislation he supports, Rockefeller said, health insurance will not be denied to people with pre-existing conditions. There will be no gender discrimination and no annual or lifetime caps placed on health coverage.

"You should not have to spend yourself into poverty to qualify for Medicaid," Rockefeller said. "If we don't do health-care reform, the costs to human beings and to society are going to be overwhelming."

Several others spoke at Tuesday's forum, which was sponsored by West Virginia AARP, West Virginians for Affordable Health Care and the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

Regina Lorenzen, who owns a photography business in Summersville with her husband, spoke to the audience about her difficulties after being diagnosed at 35 with lymphangioleiomyomatosis, a rare and often fatal lung disease usually contracted by women in their 30s and 40s.

"My lungs were full of holes. At 45, my lung function was only 25 percent normal," Lorenzen said. "On April 1, 2002, the National Casualty Co. told me they were no longer doing business in West Virginia and I would no longer be insured."

Lorenzen needed a double lung transplant that would cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

To qualify for Medicaid, some people advised her to consider selling her house, liquidating all her family assets and even getting a divorce from her husband.

Fortunately, she got help from several sources, including the National Institutes of Health, the Northern Virginia Medical Center, the Tiger Morton Catastrophic Illness Fund and Rockefeller's office.

"My story has a happy ending," she said. "But for-profit health insurance cannot work."

Renate Pore, president of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care, said, "No American family should be so devastated by medical bills that they cannot pay for day-to-day living expenses.

"If health-care rates continue to rise at the same rate, by mid-century they will consume 40 percent of our GDP [gross domestic product]," Pore said.

8/11/2009

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Gaylene Miller, director of the West Virginia chapter of AARP, warned that in the foreseeable future, half of all households will have to spend 50 percent of their annual income on health insurance if reforms are not made.

Rockefeller mentioned his successful efforts to guarantee national Veterans Administration leaders could negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies. Those companies wanted to negotiate prices hospital by hospital.

"The cost of prescription drugs [for the VA] went down by 50 percent. Why can't we do that [negotiate prescription drug costs] with Medicare?" Rockefeller said.

"The decisions we make now will affect generations to come," he said.

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