

October 16, 2009

Insurance industry is anti-reform, ex-CIGNA exec says

Jay pushing for 'public option'

By [Paul J. Nyden](#)

Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Wendell Potter, who retired last year as vice president and chief spokesman for the insurance company CIGNA, said CIGNA has been part of the "well-financed lobbying campaign every time Congress thought about reforming health care."

Potter spoke at a health-care forum Friday in Charleston, along with Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va.

"The industry led efforts to kill [President] Clinton's health-care plan," Potter said. "The industry has been at work for years laying the groundwork for devious campaigns. I did not want to be involved in another lobbying and PR campaign to kill health reform."

"We must make sure that members of Congress put our interest above the interest of insurance executives who want to make more money," he said. "More and more small businesses can't offer health insurance because of the premiums greedy Wall Street-financed companies are charging."

Rockefeller said, "The need is overwhelming for health-insurance reform," during the forum at the Pope John XXIII Center.

"People don't know where to turn," Rockefeller said. "They are scared."

Dr. Bob Walker, a rural physician in Lincoln County for 34 years, said many of his patients worked at difficult jobs like mining coal, drilling for natural gas and running small farms.

"Many of them struggled with [financial] decisions about who gets health care and who gets medicines," Walker said. "In a country that has so much, this is wrong."

Walker is vice chancellor for health services at the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

On June 24, Potter testified before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee about health insurance companies dumping coverage for many small businesses.

During his testimony, Potter said: "All it takes is one illness or accident among employees at a small business to prompt an insurance company to hike next year's premiums so high that the employer has to cut benefits, shop for another carrier, or stop offering coverage altogether - leaving workers uninsured."

Today, Potter is a senior health-care fellow at the Center on Media and Democracy in Madison, Wis.

Rockefeller said, "When he [Potter] came in from of the Commerce Committee and said what the company CIGNA was doing, it changed the whole game in Washington."

Rockefeller expressed special concern for people denied health insurance because of "pre-existing conditions."

"We need to stop that. We will stop that," he said. "'Pre-existing conditions' is lethal. We are going to fix that. No matter what else we do, we will fix that."

"If health insurance companies decide profits are more important than patients," Rockefeller said, "our world collapses around us."

Rockefeller is an outspoken advocate for the "public option," or a government-run alternative for

health insurance.

"In being for the public option, I am not trying to punish the health-insurance industry; I am trying to help people," the senator said. "I am tired, angry and frustrated at this complicated system that is not working for people."

The health bill finally approved by Congress, Rockefeller said, could be quite different from the version approved by the Finance Committee.

"The Senate Finance Committee is probably the most conservative committee in the Senate," he said. "Whenever I put up the public option, they vote it down."

Rockefeller said he might play his most important role in framing the new legislation as a member of the Senate/House Conference Committee that will approve the final version sent to the White House.

Friday's forum was jointly sponsored by groups including: West Virginians for Affordable Health Care, Citizen Action Group, West Virginia Education Association, National Association of Social Workers, West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy and the state AFL-CIO.

Reach Paul J. Nyden at pjny...@wvgazette.com or 304-345-2650.