

Health plan draws protests

Sides rally at local offices of Democrats in Congress

By [Keith Darcé](#)

Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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Isabelle Barks of Hillcrest, one of a group of about 75 protesters, makes the case for her views on health care outside Rep. Susan Davis' office in City Heights. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune)

After waging a 10-year war against cancer, Sharron Thayer of San Diego



Protesters downtown made their feelings known about health care reform. Nearly 200 people gathered outside Democratic Congress members' offices in San Diego and Chula Vista. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune) -

worries that sweeping health care reform could bring an end to her battles to stay alive.

“It scares the hell out of me thinking someone in the government can say, ‘Yes, you can get care’ or ‘No, you can’t get care,’” Thayer, a 49-year-old wife and mother, said during a rally yesterday in downtown San Diego.

She was among nearly 200 people — supporters and opponents of a legislative overhaul — who gathered yesterday afternoon outside Democratic Congress members' offices in San Diego and Chula Vista in hopes of catching the attention of those lawmakers and their staffs.

Similar demonstrations took place across the country.

The demonstrations, coupled with often boisterous town hall meetings on health care, have surprised some Washington officials and revealed the depth of feelings that exist on either side of the debate.

Passions have been stirred because health care reform is one of the few political topics that affect everyone on a highly personal level, said Robert Seidman, a professor and health economist with San Diego State University's Graduate School of Public Health.

“It gets to our very well-being, so people are very sensitive about the prospect of having that removed,” he said.

On the sidewalk outside the downtown San Diego office of Sen. Barbara Boxer, more than 100 people chanted slogans and held signs with declarations such as “Leave my health insurance alone,” “A trillion times no!” and “Public health for all — now.”

One-on-one discussions between protesters from opposing sides were largely civil, but voices rose in at least one confrontation.

“Why do we have to take the whole system down?” Curt Floit of Carmel Valley shouted as he faced off with Sari Reznick of San Diego.

“You can have your own beliefs, but I don't feel that health care should be a profit-making business,” Reznick replied.

Nearby, Holly Foster of Poway said she swung by from her downtown office to express support for President Barack Obama's health care campaign.

“I'm for a public (health insurance) option because I think it will help keep costs down and make sure everyone has insurance,” she said. “If we don't get that option, I would like everyone against it to give up their Medicare.”

In Chula Vista, none of the roughly 20 people who coalesced in front of the office of Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, said they had reviewed the health bills in Congress, which fill more than a thousand pages.

But many said they had read snippets on the Internet and heard portions read on talk-radio programs.

“What I am trying to do is listen to the radio and read Web sites, and I'm hearing from people who actually read it,” said Ruth Weiss, a retired teacher from Rancho San Diego.

Conservative organizations such as the Tea Party Patriots and the Southern California Tax Revolt Coalition are leading the anti-reform demonstrations, while a loose grouping of certain religious leaders, patient advocates and liberal activists are showing up to offer their counterpoint.

Some of the grass-roots conservative groups were created by people inspired by CNBC editor Rick Santelli. During a Feb. 19 broadcast, Santelli criticized the federal government's bailout of mortgage defaulters and called for a modern-day version of the Boston Tea Party protest.

Demonstrations like the ones yesterday likely will alter the debate in Washington once members of Congress return from recess, said Seidman, the SDSU economist.

“I fear now that politicians, being who they are and concerned about their constituents and being re-elected, will take more steps backward and will be more cautious than they know is justified,” he said.

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[Keith Darcé](#): (619) 293-1020;