

Health Care Reform with a Public Option Testimony

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Good morning, Madam Jackson-Lee, my Congressman, Chairman Conyers, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for your valuable time and attention to the critical issue of health care reform with an affordable public option with comprehensive benefits.

I am Dr. Renaissa S. Anthony and it is truly an honor to testify on behalf of myself, family, community, and most importantly my former and future patients. I emphasize the word “former” for it has been exactly 2 years, 3 months, and 20 days since I delivered health care in the “traditional” manner in which most U.S. physicians practice medicine. I also mention “future” because it is my goal to re-enter the medical field to care for patients based on their need and not their insurance status. You see, 2 years, 3 months, and 20 days ago I decided to BOYCOTT the current healthcare system. Yes...that is correct...I officially went on strike and exited the traditional practice of medicine in search of alternative ways to improve the health of patients.

My testimony begins long before my current faculty appointment at George Washington University, fellowship at NIH, and internship at Vanderbilt University...long before earning an MPH from Harvard or a medical degree from the University of Chicago. No... my testimony begins in my hometown of Detroit, Michigan where I was raised by a single mother and a community of blue collar workers loyal to the automotive industry. It was there, I first witnessed the disproportionate burdens of disease, morbidity, and mortality from diabetes, heart disease, cervical cancer, HIV and AIDS (all preventable diseases). It was also there that I witnessed and experienced firsthand disparities in healthcare delivery and service. You see, I had access to care via Medicaid insurance but I never had a doctor I could call my own. The doctors in my community were and continue to be “in and out” like revolving doors. Many are foreign medical graduates or physicians offering services in lieu of loan repayment with varying degrees of

investment, and understanding of the intricacies of inner city communities. Let's be honest here...who really wants to serve impoverished, health burdened communities with noncompliant patients who often show up late to appointments, mistrust the healthcare system, and have limited comprehension of disease processes? It is much easier to take care of patients that are healthier, more educated, medically compliant, have private "better reimbursing" insurance ....and let us not forget...the income earned serving these communities is often 6 figures higher.

Well, Madam Jackson-Lee, Chairman Conyers, and Members of the Committee....I wanted to be that doctor and serve populations similar to my hometown of Detroit. I thought by becoming the doctor, educating patients, delivering quality care and services to improve health outcomes, prevent premature deaths, and reduce what I now know as "racial and ethnic disparities." I've attended the top institutions in the nation, became the first doctor in my family, only to learn that serving such patients from higher risk communities is a challenge secondary to the limitations of our current health care system.

Patients like those I saw and treated in the ER but could not follow up with in clinic because they were either uninsured or did not have the insurance we accepted. Patients like the women we dropped during their pregnancy who went without prenatal care because our hospital decided to limit acceptance of Medicaid and other obstetricians were not accepting new Medicaid patients. Patients like Mrs. Martinez, who was transferred to our hospital after delivering a premature infant because of a uterine fibroid the size of a cantaloupe only to be told we could not perform her operation because she was uninsured. Patients like my Aunt Chris who couldn't afford health insurance and therefore went without preventative screening and was diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer. It took months to get her an appointment at Cook County and I will never forget waiting for hours in a line wrapped around the corner just to DROP OFF her prescriptions. Sadly, she died in July of this year. Or patients like my grandfather who died this past May from complications of CHF leaving my retired grandmother with medical bills greater than the combined salary of two specialty physicians. Or patients like me who on a daily basis are denied health insurance from the private industry when we seek new opportunities and are unemployed.

I boycotted our current health system because I was disgusted and disheartened by the reality that 90% of the patients I chose to serve as a doctor ...my family, my neighbors, and my community... could not get an appointment to see me if their life depended on it! I had difficulty sleeping at night and carried a tremendous amount of guilt. I had taken an oath to do no harm and furthermore I had invested years of hard work and sacrifice to get to this paramount point only to learn that the poor and the poorly insured get less than ideal care. Indeed, there are ways to serve disadvantage communities and some of my colleagues (many in this room) find very creative ways to provide outstanding care but at the cost of earning significantly less and working in hospitals and clinics with limited resources and specialists.

Therefore...I had a choice... to either accept the way things were or search for solutions to improve the current system. I remembered the people back home, those who were rooting for me with the expectation that I would come back to Detroit and make a difference. To honor them...I hung up my white coat, officially went on strike, and headed north to the nation's capitol in search of solutions. I wanted to learn how to translate my passion into action and action into legislation.

When I moved to D.C., I joined the 47 million uninsured. COBRA was offered for approximately \$1000/month but I was unemployed. Did I mention I owe \$217,000 in medical school loans gaining interest as I speak? I simply could not afford it. The private insurance companies denied my applications for private insurance including BCBS, Aetna, and Kaiser. I assumed my premiums would be higher due to my height and weight ratio but I never imagined I would be flat out denied coverage. I was a medical professional without a preexisting chronic disease, and even I could not purchase health insurance through the private market. I was told that decisions for coverage were at the sole discretion of the insurance company and I was encouraged to "take it up" with my legislator.

Fortunately, I only went 3 months without insurance but an affordable public option could have been my life line. Therefore, my journey culminates here on Capitol Hill where I am "taking this issue up with my legislator". Health care reform with a public

option with comprehensive benefits is urgently needed because 47 million people are uninsured, and at anytime, any one of us could become unemployed (even if for a short period of time) and any one of us could be denied insurance at the discretion of private insurance companies. Despite these reasons... it is simply the right and just choice.

I conclude my testimony by saying...I've learned there are a million ways to be a doctor. As they say...those who don't do...teach. In my case I teach, conduct research, and advocate for those in need of your vote for health care reform. However, I continue to dream of caring for and treating patients again, bringing life into the world and operating. However, dreams are just dreams without opportunity. That is why I implore you today to vote for health care reform with an affordable public option with comprehensive benefits to ensure all Americans have access to quality healthcare and are treated on the basis of their condition and not the status of their insurance. Only when healthcare is reformed...can I return with dignity...to the halls of the hospital and proudly wear my white coat embroidered with my name followed by the letters MD, MPH. My late grandfather and Aunt Chris depended on your vote. Today, I, my family, community, former and future patients are counting on your vote.

Thank you!