

TOWSON — U.S. Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin walked into the lion's den Monday night and went toe to toe with harsh critics of federal health care reform, an issue that has galvanized citizens and incited near-riots at town hall meetings across the country.

A boisterous and, at times, belligerent crowd booed and jeered nearly every time Cardin (D-Md.) spoke, prompting the event's moderator to repeatedly implore for calm and causing a strong police presence to gather at the front of the concert hall inside Towson University's Center for the



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Staff photo by LAURIE DEWITT

Protesters and supporters alike of health care reform gather outside of Towson University's Center for the Arts on Monday afternoon during a town hall meeting in which Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin spoke and took questions from the audience, which was capped at 500 due to fire regulations.



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But there were no confrontations at Monday night's forum, in which the number of people protesting outside far outnumbered those who got seats in the hall. Cardin said he appreciated the interaction and didn't hesitate to go forward with his public meeting even after some of his colleagues have faced disorderly crowds. A forum in St. Louis last week resulted

"I think it's an opportunity to listen to the people of Maryland, to let them ask questions and for people to listen to the answers and try to get more information out so that the process moves forward," he told reporters before the start of the forum. "We want to get feedback from our constituents as to how they perceive the current health care system and what they want to see in reform."

One of them was Steve Hudson, a physician who lives in Silver Spring and ran unsuccessfully as a Republican for the 8th Congressional District in 2008.

"There has to be dissent in this country," he said, while holding a yellow Gadsden flag, recognizable by its "Don't Tread on Me" motto. "That's what it was founded on."

Cardin agreed that protesters have a right to express their views, as long as things don't

"It's part of our [democratic] process for people to be able to peacefully demonstrate the views that they have," he said.

More than 1,600 people RSVP'd for the event, said Susan Sullam, a Cardin spokeswoman. Despite the high temperature, the first person was in line at 3 p.m., more than three hours before doors opened. Those who scored seats were not allowed to bring in signs or placards. Outside, the protests continued throughout the meeting and scattered only when a fierce thunderstorm blew through the area around 9 p.m.

Many of Hudson's fellow protesters yelled across the street at a smaller group of health care supporters.

"All they want to do with government is just give away the money we're contributing and it's time they start thinking about who's footing the bill," said Don Kyne of Parkville, who said Congress should be looking at tort reform rather than a massive health care overhaul.

But supporters did not back down, saying the health care system needs to be improved. Doing nothing, they said, will lead to higher costs and more uninsured workers.

"The status quo doesn't work and hasn't worked for many years," said Sean Dobson, executive director of Progressive Maryland, which advocates on behalf of working

"This is a historical opportunity to join the rest of the civilized world and establish quality health care for all citizens."

Inside, the crowd heckled Cardin for taking too long with his opening presentation, sidestepping questions and providing what they deemed misinformation about the reform proposals Congress will consider after their summer recess. At times, it seemed the forum was on the brink of getting out-of-hand.

Opponents lambasted the as-yet-unknown cost of reform, appealing for no tax hikes and said the current system doesn't need such a rapid overhaul. Only when Cardin said that he urged his Senate colleagues to take their time in formulating a health care bill did the audience applaud.

But the cost of doing nothing is too great, he said, pointing to data that show the cost of health care nearly doubling in the next 10 years if the current system remains in place. The average cost to cover a family of four has ballooned from about \$5,700 in 1999 to more than \$12,000 in 2008, he said. One of Congress' chief objectives, he said, is to increase competition and individual choice to bring down costs.

"It's unfair for those who have health insurance to have to pay for those who don't have health insurance," Cardin said.

At times, Cardin had to shout over the raucous crowd to be heard. More than 50 attendees hoped to ask questions, but there was only time for about 20 to be answered.

One questioner asked the senator for an example of anything the government has regulated and made more efficient. When Cardin replied the national parks system and Medicare, the audience erupted in laughter and incredulity.

"I am confident that we are going to get this right," he said. "We're not there yet."