

Thousands rally to support health-care reform in downtown Washington

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Amid a sea of brightly colored T-shirts and wave after wave of protest signs, Regina Holliday's homemade banner still stuck out as she marched Tuesday in support of health-care reform.

Clad in a painter's smock, Holliday, [whose uninsured husband died of cancer in the summer of 2009](#), waved an image of him and her two sons.

"We want a foot in the door. That's what this bill is," Holliday, 37, said about the current health-care reform legislation.

Holliday was one of thousands of protesters who marched through downtown Washington on Tuesday to criticize the health insurance industry and attempt to draw support for the Democratic proposal to overhaul the system.

Organizers with Health Care for America Now, a coalition of labor and other liberal groups, targeted insurance company leaders attending a policy conference held by industry advocates at the Ritz-Carlton hotel at 22nd and M streets NW. Reinforcing [the Obama administration's recent criticism of increasing health premiums](#), the demonstrators marched to the hotel to make a mock "citizen's arrest" of insurance executives, who were demonized on demonstration posters and over the loudspeaker.

"We're declaring this a crime scene!" bellowed Richard Trumka, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, to the roar of the crowd. AFL-CIO is a federation of about 60 labor unions.

Organizers of the protest said they brought about 5,000 people from across the United States to downtown Washington. They began their march in Dupont Circle, where they heard speeches from politicians and activists.

Former Vermont governor and physician Howard Dean cheered on demonstrators earlier in the morning. "We deserve a vote. . . . This is a vote about one thing -- are you for the insurance companies or for the American people?"

Other marchers joined the main group as it reached the hotel. Police had set up barriers blocking access to the entrance. As protesters chanted and beat on drums, men and women in business suits took photos on their cellphones from behind the barricades.

The protest comes as President Obama makes a final push for passage of the health-care reform package, which critics say would not control health-care costs, among other failings.

"We will continue to send the message to Congress that they need to listen to us, not the health insurance companies, and that they needed to get reform done now," said David Elliot, communications director for USAction, a nonprofit that helped co-found the Health Care for America campaign in 2008.

Insurers say they are being vilified.

"All health plans are in the same situation in trying to deal with the steadily increasing medical costs in the delivery system, which are not sustainable," a spokesman for Anthem Blue Cross of California said last month when the firm agreed to a request by California regulators to postpone a premium increase of 39 percent for people who buy individual policies.

Like other insurers, Anthem also said rates are going up for individual insurance policies because, in the poor economy, healthy people are dropping coverage, leaving a pool of customers who are sicker and more expensive to cover.

The administration contends that the rate increases reflect excessive profits; insurance [lobbyists](#) counter that their rates mirror underlying increases in prices charged by doctors, hospitals and drug firms.

No one was arrested during Tuesday's demonstration, Elliot said. But there was a minor skirmish between police and protesters when some tried to gain access to a parking tunnel next to the hotel. After a small group was allowed to deliver "citizen's arrest warrants" to America's Health Insurance Plans, the lobbying group hosting the conference, the crowd began to disperse.

The lobby plans to spend more than \$1 million on a nationwide advertising campaign this week to, as one official with the group said, "set the record straight about rising health-care costs."

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