

Pat Ford – Health Security for All

Hello brothers and sisters! It is so good to be here.

Each and every one of you is to be commended for the outstanding work you are doing on behalf of not only our members, but for working men and women in your local communities, your state and around the nation. I am proud to be part of this great movement.

Today, I'm here to talk about an issue that is important to every American – securing quality, affordable health care.

There is just one word for the state of health care coverage for American families: disgraceful.

It is a national crisis. There was a time not too long ago, when the first question you'd be asked in a doctor's office was "how do you feel?" Now, when you go in, the first question you're asked is: "what type of insurance do you have?"

For the 2 million people who lost their health insurance last year, and for the 39 million Americans who didn't have it to lose, the answer is: "I don't have insurance."

Thirty-nine million Americans without health insurance is 14 per cent of the total U.S. population without health insurance. Now, that's a lot of mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and grandparents who live and work in the richest nation on earth and cannot afford to take care of their family's health.

Very few working families are not affected by this national crisis. It has touched me personally. My sister died at 58 from heart disease. She was killed by an illness that could have been treated and managed. With preventive health care, she might still be alive today.

But she was a working class, black woman who didn't have health insurance. Like so many of us, she only went to the doctor when she felt sick.

How can people who don't have health insurance go to the doctor for regular checkups and treatment for chronic health problems? Too often, we are so sick we *have* to go to the doctor. We may end up in the ER suffering from preventable, but curable diseases. These kinds of diseases have taken their toll and are killing us. We have to turn this around.

(Pause)

Working Americans used to be able to take affordable health care for granted. Thanks to hard-won battles by workers just like you, good coverage was once part of just about every benefit package.

Not anymore. Today, just about everyone who has insurance is paying more for less coverage.

More than 8 out of 10 uninsured Americans are from working families. And more than half of them are in families that earn low wages – about \$34,000 for a family of four. This is not a race issue, either. White, black, and Latino men, women, and children are without health insurance in America. We have to turn this around.

(Pause)

Consider this, brothers and sisters: As our economy gets weaker, health care costs are rising at double-digit rates.

As our economy gets weaker, employers are cutting back on health insurance coverage.

As our economy gets weaker, more and more families have to pay out of pocket for health care expenses.

As our economy gets weaker, more Americans are losing their jobs and their health coverage.

Many Americans have lost their family's health coverage because they got laid off, changed jobs, became disabled, or their employer decided coverage was too expensive to provide.

Health care costs are increasing faster than wages, and there is no let up in site.

Between 2000 and 2002, average family health insurance premiums rose 23 percent – to nearly \$600 a month – and most employers passed on the higher costs to employees through higher premiums, co-pays, and deductibles.

Between now and 2010, American workers can expect to see their wages increase 38 per cent, while health insurance is expected to increase one hundred twenty-three per cent.

And you know what? The thousands of nurses, doctors, nursing home workers, and home care providers who are united in SEIU see firsthand how the lack of secure, affordable health care affects their patients.

They see their patients not being able to afford costly prescription drugs. They see laid off and displaced workers seeking emergency care when they are sick and waiting too long to receive treatment. Preventive care is not even an option.

On top of that, two decades of managed care and cost cutting have left many hospitals understaffed and inadequately funded – threatening patients and driving nurses from the profession.

As the largest union of nurses in the country, SEIU is standing up for safe staffing and limits on mandatory overtime to protect quality patient care in hospitals.

Securing affordable health coverage for displaced workers and for low-income working families and children is at the top of our agenda, and we need your help. We need you to work with us to turn this situation around.

(Pause)

We all want to know that our families can count on high quality health care when we need it most.

Each of us must be an advocate of access to health care – health care security is about making poor people, workers, our members, and the nation strong.

With the numbers of uninsured working families rising and more Americans losing their health care or paying more for what insurance coverage they have, we must demand that Congress put universal health care back on the agenda.

We cannot allow another session of Congress to come and go without demanding relief for our working families. We cannot allow Congress to continue to tiptoe around expanding health coverage and getting a handle on costs.

This national crisis demands national attention. States are facing massive deficits. They need the federal government to step in with some basic relief for working families and displaced workers.

(Pause)

We've got to stand up for a system that puts patients first and gives health care workers the time and support to provide quality care.

As the nation's largest health care union, SEIU is committed to bringing caregivers, community leaders, and small business owners together to work toward solutions that will provide secure, affordable health coverage for all.

We've learned that the only way we get anything is by standing up and standing together.

Our nation cannot be strong if our workers cannot afford to stay healthy.

This issue of health security is but one of many, many examples of why you are so important to SEIU. Being a union member is not just about a fatter paycheck. It's about being part of a movement that believes in the worth and dignity of every human being.

We will find the answers that our members, our union, our nation, and our world need. By your example, you are making "stronger together" not just a catchy slogan, but a true means to an end.

Brothers and sisters, thank you for listening to me today.