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Opinion: Fighting to preserve Obamacare

BY SUSAN FREUDENHEIM

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I broke a bone in my foot several weeks ago, and I've been limping around in an expensive, ugly boot and shlepping to doctors ever since. A simple slip costs lots of money — happily, not entirely to me. I have health insurance; I'm lucky.

How lucky was especially clear a couple of Sundays ago, when I attended a OneLA Healthcare Summit at Temple Beth Am. On a gorgeous afternoon, some 200 members of more than 20 synagogues, churches and other organizations ignored the lure of weekend fun to gather at Beth Am to do their part in the continuing health care debate that is going on at both a state and federal level. OneLA, a community organizing nonprofit, counts among its member organizations Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, Temple Judea, Temple Isaiah, Temple Israel of Hollywood and Beth Am. Also present were just as many congregants from St. Agnes Church, Precious Blood, St. Paul the Apostle, Transfiguration Church and more. It was a true coalition of various faiths, socioeconomic groups and ethnicities.



Participants of the OneLA Healthcare Summit at Temple Beth Am.

If you ever wanted to see a group hug of all Los Angeles, you should have been there.

And they weren't just talking. They were listening: California Assemblyman Mike Feuer came to speak of his efforts to get immediate regulation in California of the health care industry through a bill known as AB 52. Herb Schultz, regional director for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, spoke about work to implement the new federal health insurance exchange, which will be in place by 2014 according to federal law. And California State Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones talked about the state's need to get control of costs in the health insurance industry.

It can be confusing. Exchanges, assembly bills, regulation. And how about that rant we keep hearing, that "Obamacare is job killing."

At the conference, four small-business owners from very different walks of life told their stories. Temple Israel member Marilyn Szatmary, who runs a talent agency and for 18 years has always offered her employees health insurance, told of crippling effects of the rising costs of medical coverage, making it impossible for her to expand her business. She described one employee diagnosed with an autoimmune disease who has to spend half her time on the phone dealing with her insurance. "You don't find out what a policy covers until you get sick," Szatmary said.

Ronny Bensimon of Beth Am downsized his furniture company during the recession, in part because of the cost of providing insurance: "We have switched to more limited plans and asked employees to contribute more," he said. Mayra Alvarado of St. Agnes Church runs a child-care center with her husband and three employees. She cannot offer any insurance at all. Her employees go to Tijuana and pay cash for medical care. There were more stories like this, of employers choosing between insurance and hiring staff. Mary Rosenberg, a physical therapist, reduced her practice from three full-time and one half-time physical therapists to just two, and she gets it from both ends — insurance companies that have reduced reimbursement to below the level of 1991, she said, even as she faces rising costs to insure her employees. Yet, she said, "I won't practice in a setting where I can't offer quality medical care."

Who's killing jobs?

AB 52 "strengthens and expands upon existing federal and state laws for health insurance rate review," according to the literature handed out at the meeting. Remember last year, for example, when Anthem Blue Cross tried, but failed when faced with public outcry, to raise rates as much as 39 percent for people with individual policies? That kind of move would be regulated by AB 52. In California, we already regulate homeowners insurance, auto insurance and even medical malpractice, Commissioner Jones pointed out. So why not health insurance?

I sat next to Rabbi Laura Geller, senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel, who has been a leader among synagogues in the OneLA efforts. She turned to me during the meeting and said, "These issues concern our congregants, but they also concern the synagogue itself. We are a small business insuring our employees, too."

So, if you're convinced, as I am, that this is one of the key issues of our time, what can you do?

Here's where OneLA comes in — you, too, can join in. Community organizing allows individual voices, joined together, to make up a nucleus. Then many such nuclei, all focused on one or more shared issue, mobilize and raise their voices together to speak louder to government representatives. It's not about rallying in the streets, though that can happen, too. It's about the hard, incremental work of participating in the process. Perhaps your synagogue is already a part of this effort. Then you can join. And if it's not, then now — as you make your resolutions for the coming year — is the time to get your community involved.

Here's the result of the meeting I attended:

- Rabbi Geller of Temple Emanuel and Rabbi Susan Leider of Beth Am will co-host a health care Shabbaton in spring 2012.
- Around that time, St. Agnes Church will hold a Sunday summit, as well.
- Meanwhile, members of OneLA will conduct working meetings with Schultz on the federal exchange, with Jones on the state level, and with Feuer to figure out how to help with passage of AB 52. Right now AB 52 has passed on the California Assembly floor, passed the State Senate appropriations committee, but is stalled in the Senate because it needs seven more votes.
- In addition, Temple Judea in Tarzana will be convening a meeting similar to Beth Am's on Nov 13.

I spoke with Leider a few days after the meeting to understand better how, as a rabbi at this busy time of preparing for the High Holy Days, she found time to do this work as well. She said that since she started in this arena in 2008, "It has transformed my rabbinate." She told me of getting out "from behind the computer and out into the community," and that in talking to her congregants she now knows more than ever to ask, "What's keeping you up at night?"

"When you spend time getting to know each other," Leider explained, "you figure out where the self-interest is." And that's the point of all this. Affordable health care is not someone else's issue, it's ours. If our employers can't afford to pay for the rising cost of health insurance, how can we?

Leider told me a story, which she heard at one of the first training sessions she attended for this work: A group of people see baskets of babies floating down a river, and they are horrified, so they grab each baby and nurture and raise it as if it were their own. (Moses, perhaps?) Still, the babies keep coming. So, one day someone says, "While you take care of these babies, I'm going up the river to see why this is happening and try to solve that problem."

And that's what these hundreds of people involved with OneLA are doing now. They're walking up the river to work on the source of the problem. So the babies will be able to stay with their mothers. So we can all afford to go to doctors. So we won't be staying up so many nights worrying.

Shanah tovah. May this be a year of good health and caring and affordable health care when you need it.

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