

THE KEYSTONE



A NEWSLETTER BY THE MEMBERS OF PUT PEOPLE FIRST! PENNSYLVANIA



Put People First Members from Philly and South Central PA staged a die-in outside Independence Blue Cross (IBX) Headquarters in Philadelphia, demanding IBX's attendance at the Southeast PA Town Hall.

photo by Chris Baker Evens

Victory! PPF Wins Town Halls Across PA

by Hilary O'Connell, Philly, and Campaign Team

At a Put People First meeting this spring, Robert, a leader from Southwest Philadelphia, pushed us all to hold the Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID) accountable to create transparency and participation in the "rate review process": The annual procedure where the PID determines how much insurance companies can charge for Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) plans for individuals and small groups. We won our 2016 campaign for the first public hearing in PA on ACA rates, and we knew that this year we needed to do more. So we sprang into action. In less than three months, we advocated for, planned, and pulled off not one, but five

powerful Town Halls all across Pennsylvania — in people's communities, and at times when working people could attend.

Our efforts paid off: Over 150 people attended Town Halls in Bucks, Northumberland, Blair, York and Allegheny Counties.

The Town Halls achieved many of Put People First's goals: 1) We built our base and connections with partners across the state. 2) We made the invisible visible by exposing insurance companies as the true power-holders behind PID. 3) We developed and enriched leaders across PPF. And 4) we increased accountability, transparency and participation in the rate review process. This was a clear win.

Reflecting on this victory, we ask: Why did we win? How can we win again? The answer is simple: At each step of the process, we all moved together.

This victory belongs to every PPF committee, team, and member. (Read a detailed account on one team's preparation on pg. 4!)

Karim Sariahmed, a PPF member in Sunbury, opened testimony at the first Town Hall and set the tone for the storytelling that followed: "All of us know people who get sick, and many who die, because they don't have insurance. And I really want the weight of that to be in the room with us when

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PPF in the Fight for the ACA

by Irish, Pittsburgh

There is a lot of insecurity in my family around healthcare. Our income has been unstable, and often shrinking, since 2013 when Lyme disease and cancer stopped my partner and me, respectively, from working. The ACA made it possible for us to have access to health insurance, but healthcare costs are our biggest expense and growing every year. So it has been with mixed feelings and an eye toward something better that I have participated in actions to protect the ACA.

Since January, myself and other members of the Pittsburgh HRC (Human Rights Committee) have attended rallies, called and written letters to our federal representatives, gone to town halls, told our stories to the press, and even gone to Washington, DC and been arrested. At every step we think not just about all that we might lose if the ACA is repealed, but also about how we can use this moment to advance PPF's Healthcare is a Human Right campaign.

When we speak at rallies or to the press, we share our personal stories, then attack insurance companies and profit-driven care and give our vision for a system that puts people first. One PGH member made big, beautiful PPF signs so even just a few of us can make a big splash at any action. We yell the loudest and help

lead chants that amplify our message - "Medicaid not millionaires" instead of "ACA here to stay." We always bring a clip-board with a PPF sign-up sheet.

In March we hosted a action training led by national organizers to protect the ACA where we learned about bird-dogging, a tactic to force politicians to take a stance on an issue. That same week we used our new skills to bird-dog our state representatives for a hearing on universal healthcare. We continue to invite those who came to the training to PPF events and one is even on the HRC now.

When I participated in civil disobedience in the Senate office buildings in DC, I got to spend several hours with activists from across PA. I told them about all our exciting work in PPF and I bet I will see them again.

I am proud of the work we have done to protect the gains made by the ACA. I'm even more proud of how we've taken a fight for a mediocre law and turned it into opportunity after opportunity for PPF's Healthcare is a Human Right campaign. It's easy to see the impact of our participation and leadership, both in how the healthcare debate is framed, and literally in the faces of our membership. Whatever does or doesn't happen with the ACA this year, there is no question that PPF is better off for having participated in the fight!

Embodying Our Power at the IBX Tower

by Anna Cibils, Philly

I didn't grow up going to protests or actions. For years after moving to the US I was in the process of applying for US citizenship, and so I learned that any expression of any kind of political opinion could cost me and my family the chance of getting permanent status. I also inherited the fear of governments as an immigrant and the daughter of Argentinian parents who grew up during the military dictatorship in Argentina.

When I joined Put People First!, this fear and aversion to protests was still very real for me. Despite this, through my process of political development in PPF, I have learned the importance of taking direct action. I was an active participant in the protest against Independence Blue Cross (IBX) health insurance company in Philadelphia on July 26, 2017.

The action was one of a series that we have held at the IBX headquarters in Philadelphia as part of our campaign to demand that IBX stop raising premiums on Obamacare plans. Our main demand of IBX this time around was for Daniel Hilferty, the CEO, to attend the Pennsylvania Insurance Department Town Hall in September, to answer to Pennsylvanians who are struggling to afford increasingly unaffordable IBX plans on the Healthcare Marketplace.

The action was organized quickly, but even in a short time the Campaign team and Media and Communications team ensured that the effort was collective --



photos by Chris Baker Evens

that as many PPF members as possible felt ownership over the action. The day before the action we had a sign-making party where we agreed on the final plan, which included testimonies, chants, and ending with a die-in. I volunteered last-minute to be an MC with fellow member Zack Hershman. I remembered the first time I did canvassing in PPF, I was paired up with Zack and he helped me get over my nerves of talking to people, so I knew I was in good hands for MCing.

The day of the action I actually felt excited, not my usual sickness. I've been angry for so long that channeling it at these companies isn't a problem. As much as I would love to scream out from the rooftops all the ways I've been hurt by people in power, I've learned that anger on its own will not sustain us -- while emotional intelligence is powerful, it must be combined with history to understand how our individual experiences fit inside a much larger narrative and fight. Our stories, relationships, and histories fuel this campaign.

The protest itself was impeccably

organized and very moving, with testimonies from people all across the city and surrounding counties. The most powerful moment of the day for me was when several of our South Central PA PPF family joined us as we began the action. Having them there to support us made me feel deeply rooted in our work across PA -- what we are facing is not just happening in Philly. The story is the same across our state: companies take advantage of politicians and bureaucrats to maintain an unjust system, where people's ability to live is dependent on their ability to pay.

Here's one of my biggest lessons from two years of being involved in this struggle: It doesn't matter how many times the insurance executives and regulators lecture us that our demands are unrealistic because of markets and profits. It remains a fact that the government and insurance companies continue to prioritize profits over people. They have blood on their hands; we will not be silent. By the end of the action, I felt the importance of visibly embodying our power, our intelligence, our connectedness.

Member Reflection: Pittsburgh Town Hall

by Carol Cutler, Westmoreland County, with special thanks to Barbara White, Pittsburgh

When I joined PPF nine months ago, I heard members say that getting a hearing with the Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID) was a big win. I was puzzled — even skeptical. But after my Town Hall experience, I'm a believer!

As a member of the Pittsburgh Healthcare Rights Committee (HRC), I saw how — with support from PPF Campaign, Basebuilding, and Media & Communications Teams and coordinators — our members built our membership base and grew our organizing capacity!

Pittsburgh HRC members door-knocked, tabled at various events and spoke to people at a free dental clinic and at a food pantry, building up a long list of new contacts and interest for the town hall. A member who is a patron of the library where the meeting was held skillfully secured the librarian's permission to table at the library, and her initiative in publicizing the meeting on the library's platforms turned out several people from the area.

All these efforts brought out a total of 29 people—nine members of the public from three counties (Allegheny, Washington and Westmoreland), 11 PPF members including two from the Johnstown HRC, four people from partner organizations (Achieva, SEIU, and YWCA Marketplace Navigators), two members of the press, (one

wrote a great article for a major online outlet!) an aide to PA Representative Dan Frankel, an employee of UPMC Health Plan, and a representative from CHIP.

PID's stubborn insistence on running the Town Hall as a promotional/educational event challenged our members to open up space for people to speak. At the start of the meeting, one member called for everyone to introduce themselves and tell where they were from. When PID's David Buono claimed that the meeting was not intended as an opportunity for people to testify, a member quoted from PID's press release proving him wrong. Another member interrupted Buono's presentation,

demanding time for people to speak, and several people were able to relate their unhappy experiences with insurance companies. Then, one of our members took control of the room not only with the power of her testimony, but also by insisting that she face the audience as she spoke. Moved by her story, a local resident asked, "Wouldn't a national health program like other countries have been better?" defying Buono's efforts to keep that topic out of the discussion. Finally two of our members forcefully closed the meeting calling out PID for giving insurance companies more than they asked for last year and demanding that PID grant no increases this year.

Protests at the Capitol in defense of the ACA



PPF Members debrief doorknocking in Lancaster



Diane from Philly presents at a community forum

The Mother Jones Leadership Program



Mother Jones Leaders and Mentors from across the state at the MJLP annual retreat.

The Mother Jones Leadership Program is for leaders who are committed to uniting poor and dispossessed people in their communities, all across our state, and beyond. It involves six months of financial support, mentorship, study, skills development, and organizing - all directed at helping these leaders bring our organization to the next level.

The program is named for Mother Jones because of the example she set with her leadership. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, she traveled across the country supporting workers who were organizing and fighting for their lives and their rights. From West Virginia to Colorado, and of course in Pennsylvania, she was known by the rich and powerful as "the most dangerous woman in America." She was always connected to the people who were hurting the most. In Pennsylvania, she helped organize a "Children's March" from Kensington in Philadelphia all the way to President Teddy Roosevelt's home in New York, to rally support for the rights of child laborers who were on strike at the time.

Leader Interview: Vespera Barrow, Pittsburgh

Vespera Barrow is a lifelong resident of Pittsburgh. She has been an activist since 2002 and she hopes to mentor others and pass the baton.

How did you first get involved with Put People First?

[At the Pittsburgh] Town Hall in January 2017 about cuts to Medicaid and Medicare, that Trump was talking about as soon as he got elected. I was worried about family and friends losing their health insurance. [Put People First] was also talking about how this will deeply impact Black people and other people of color, disabled people, trans folks, non-binary folks, and I was like, "They get it. They include all the people who will be heavily impacted by these cuts."

What have you learned from your experience in the Mother Jones Leadership Program?

We did an eight week study about the movement to end slavery. We started in 1619 when they brought the first enslaved Africans over to

Virginia. Typically when people think of the abolitionist movement, they start off in the 1830s, but there were rebellions as far back as the 1500s. We focused heavily on Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and we have to think about enslaved Africans, they were part of getting their own freedom, they ran away, they staged rebellions. It was poor whites getting together; it was enslaved Africans; it was also free Africans getting together - people from all socio-economic lines coming together because this wasn't right, just like a lack of healthcare access isn't right. If you want to move forward, you have to look back to know where you are going.

What would the world be like if we had universal healthcare?

We won't have the highest bankruptcy due to medical care, the highest infant mortality rate of any industrialized nation. There is a new abolitionist movement to abolish the prison system, if we get universal healthcare it'll also tie into prison abolition and we won't be the largest democracy, which means freedom, with the most prisoners. Locally, Pittsburgh has high infant mortality rates for Black women and the highest rates of asthma of any city in the nation. This is partly due to the steel mills but it's also because of lack of access to healthcare. Most Black people here are living in poverty. If [Pennsylvania] gets universal healthcare, there would be [less] debt, people would be living longer, and we there would be [lower] infant mortality rates, less heart disease, less diabetes, and better healthcare for indigenous people.

Leader Reflection: Greg Fritz, Jr., Lancaster

In the Mother Jones Leadership Program, I participated in a Leadership Across Difference training with the other program leaders, our mentors, a few campaign team leaders, our co-founder and a few other longtime PPF leaders. These are all people I love and look up to very much. During this study on the abolitionist movement and the movement to end slavery, many things came up for different people in our very diverse group. This may be expected since we have all been victims of a system that has developed a way to keep poor and working people at odds with each other through the laws that keep the elite few in power.

Most of the things I was learning about I had very little knowledge of, or had been taught "alternative facts" through the government run school system. I already considered myself "woke" but I was about to be "woke x2". During this study one of our new leaders "called out" white Americans in a way that felt harsh at times. This was painful for me to hear. I wanted to stop attending these studies, but decided I would stick it out because maybe there was a lesson I needed to learn or that I could offer to somebody else through this situation. I used that as motivation, and that leader's words, in every study from then on - being very mindful of what they had pointed out. I think this is when my personal growth started to form. This leader could have very easily put me in my place and attacked me back with their wisdom and knowledge, but instead they continued to love and

photo by Chris Baker Evans



support me. I am so grateful for all of the great leaders in PPF and especially this one.

We went back to our local Healthcare Rights Committees to share what we learned in the study. One leader commented on how as a white person new to this country, they feel like they are sometimes hurt and unfairly targeted through these discussions. And because of my previous experience I was able to say "My fellow leader, as an example, is pissed off at the way the system is, how we have not come far enough fast enough. She is hurt by what she experiences daily." I was able to pass knowledge on from having learned how to listen.

The Mother Jones Leaders and PPF are a tight knit group that considers each other our family. These discussions are very hard to have and there were just tears shed in the other room. These discussions get tough. They are tough among ourselves, and they will be even tougher to have with people on the outside... but we must continue to have them.

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we're talking about the decisions that get made about our lives, and our insurance plans."

Members from across the state testified at the four Town Halls that followed, delivering powerful stories of our struggles. Pittsburgh member Julia Willis spoke: "This is not a humane system. It's not taking care of us. Healthcare is a human right." As Philadelphia member Adrienne Standley testified, "I know [PID] isn't able to change the prices, or tell them what to charge. But I'm not able to afford to go to the doctor." We insisted the PID recognize our lives are on the line. Each time someone told their story, you could see audience members nodding their heads in agreement.

Through this victory, we forced the PID and the insurance companies to acknowledge Put People First as a powerful voice in PA. While insurance companies themselves did not come to the town halls as we requested, we did receive a request from Independence Blue Cross in to meet in Southeast PA as a result of our pressure.

The Town Halls were an important and successful milestone in the process of building a mass movement in Pennsylvania of everyday people who are clear that healthcare is a human right. As we push forward, we'll continue to bring people together to speak truth to power. The PID and insurance companies will have to learn: **HEALTHCARE IS A HUMAN RIGHT! WE WON'T STOP WITHOUT A FIGHT!**

A poem by Laile Wilson, York

A beautiful horizon	I am the ones
Birds chirping of a new day	Thrown away
Green bulbs of spring	Shunned
Wind blowing refreshing	Lost to the lies of
Reviving	Men
Energizing	Hiding their
Rays of light	Own hidden sin
Auras shining	Between the pages
Beginning a new	Of the words of life
Journey	Cursing me
Enlightening the path	Of my Individuality
of the dawn	To walk this journey
Fresh oil	Alone
Power beyond measure	Seeking only
Words igniting the	I am the promiscuous one
Pages unfolding	Jezabel
Detailing the	The harlot
Life lived	The widow
Losted	The prodigal one
Discovered	Who went astray
Uncovered	Selling all her riches
Rediscovered	To take the road
Shining the beams	Less traveled
Of tears	The survivor
Cries sorrows	The believer
Joys and happiness	Following the intuition
Pleasures and pains	Of my soul
Washing away the troubles	Spirit leading me
Of the old	Here
Awakening	I am the daughter
Restored	Of the most high
Glorious colors	The true high priestess
That rainbowed the	The super natural
Path unknown but	Connecting to the Lord
Taken to restore	Of lords
What was stolen	I am the dark sky
A story bold enough	The one born at night
To be told	Enthusiastic for this life
By the one holding	The goody two shoes
The pen	That follows his rules
Of a road less taken	The keeper of the word
But foretold	The New testament
I am the keeper	I am All
Of the word	But nothing
All things pure	And everything to
And peaceful	Him
The peace maker	I am dark Beauty
The troubled soul	But most
Walking the path	Know me
Of misery	I am divinely
Shame	Favored
Pain	But can call me
Longing to be free	LAILE

Artists' Page



Peace of Mind by Kaceem Barnett, Pittsburgh

I do art because I can remember when my mom took to see the Jacob Lawrence exhibit and would read me Harriet Tubman and Promised Land and that inspired me to be an artist. So I started drawing people, and then I did my first collage in first grade — the collage on the weather — and then I fell in love with collage and art. That small collage inspired big and more beautiful collages.

Facebook: Kaceem Barnett
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