HUNDREDS OF HEALTH REFORM ADVOCATES AND SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS CONFRONT AHIP AT CHICAGO CONFERENCE

Small Business Owners Detail Choice Between Jobs and Health Coverage, Call For Reform, and Attempt to Meet With Insurance Lobby CEO While Hundreds Rally in Solidarity Outside Industry Event

Chicago, IL – Eight small business owners from around the country appeared at the same hotel as the health insurance lobby’s annual Fall Forum conference in downtown Chicago today. Joined by Wendell Potter, ex-CEO of Cigna, the business owners recounted stories of exorbitant private health insurance costs forcing them to chose between the growth of their livelihoods—including keeping and expanding jobs—and their ability to afford necessary health care for them and their employees. Outside the Downtown Renaissance Hotel, hundreds of supporters gathered in solidarity, holding large signs with messages like “HEALTH REFORM = JOBS.”

Prior to their arrival in Chicago, the business owners—who hail from Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Nebraska, and New Hampshire—sent a letter to Karen Ignagni, the President and CEO of America’s Health Insurance Plans (AHIP), requesting she meet with them to hear their stories in person. The letter was delivered Friday morning and is included below.

Even though Ms. Ignagni’s group was meeting at the hotel just down the hall from the very people harmed by the companies she represents, she ignored the small business owners’ request.

“We know a majority of small business owners want to provide health coverage for their employees, but they simply cannot afford the skyrocketing costs of health insurance plans available to them on the market today, said Richard Kirsch, National Campaign Manager, Health Care for America Now. “Just as Karen Ignagni should have met with the families who asked to see her last month in Washington, DC, she should have made the time to hear the stories of small business owners who are struggling and need reform. The health insurance industry continues to put Wall Street-driven profit expectations before people’s health care needs and the economic well-being of our nation’s small businesses. Maybe if Ms. Ignagni heard from small business owners, she would better understand whom she and her colleagues are fighting when they lobby against good, affordable health care and the choice of a public health insurance option.”

“I’m here today because in tough times like these, small businesses like my family’s literally have to make a choice between health care and jobs,” said ReShonda Young, operations manager for her family business Alpha Express, Inc. in Waterloo, IA and a member of the Main Street Alliance's national Executive Committee. “We want to provide coverage for our employees—not only because it’s the right thing to do, but also because it helps us retain and attract valuable employees and stay competitive. My brother relocated to join my family’s business, but the burden of health care premiums may lose us his talent—and threaten our future. That’s not good for us, and it’s not good for our local economy.”
AHIP has paid millions of dollars trying to kill health care reform, including releasing a discredited report last month that *Time* called a “selective, dishonest analysis” and the Associated Press said “uses facts selectively” and is littered with “misleading spin.” Even the financial analysis firm the insurance industry commissioned to write the report backed away from it, admitting that it ignored provisions aimed at making health care more affordable.

**Had Ms. Ignagni shown up, she would have heard the following stories:**

**DAVID BORRIS** and his wife started a small gourmet carryout food store in Illinois that grew into a catering business, now employing 23 full time staff. Already only able to cover 12 of his 23 employees, Borris is facing a 46% hike in his premium for next year that may force him to make layoffs or drop group coverage altogether.

**KAY FORBES-SMITH** has owned and run an international corporate communications and training firm for 20 years in Indiana. She currently offers group health insurance to her employees, paying half the premiums, but she constantly faces increasing costs that have forced some employees to opt out of the plan. The costs of health care hurt Kay’s bottom line and her business’ ability to competitively attract talented employees.

**ALTON JOHNSON**, a car enthusiast from Arkansas, opened an auto body shop 14 years ago. He has been able to provide health insurance to his eight employees for the last six years. But high premiums that keep rising have eaten into his profit margin. Unlike other businesses, he still provides insurance, but he’s not sure how much longer he can do it without making other cuts.

**RICK POORE** has run his Nebraska screen print and embroidery business for 15 years, doing business nationwide. He’s not able to provide insurance to all 33 of his employees, but still he pays more than $61,000 in insurance costs between a group plan for half his full time employees and subsidizing individual plans. The costs prevent him from investing in the growth of his business to remain competitive in his market.

**MEREDITH STOLPER**, a restaurant owner in New Hampshire for more than 20 years, was able to provide health insurance to her 14 employees until her insurer abruptly canceled her group plan. The increased costs of securing new insurance—combined with business hurting during the recession—forced Meredith to be unable to provide coverage for her employees. She is worried that her employees will not be able to obtain coverage, forcing them to find other employment and hurting her business.

**MECHEALL WILLIAMS** has managed restaurant franchises in Louisiana for 20 years as the owner of Subchaser Inc. He can’t keep his business afloat and afford health insurance for his more than 20 employees. The lack of coverage cost him a valued employee. She returned with a pay increase, but serious illness then sent her driving more than an hour to see a doctor.

**JAN WOOD** and her husband own a martial arts business in Illinois with 2 part-time employees and other part-time instructors. A family member’s pre-existing condition has made coverage unaffordable thus forcing them to pay almost $24,000 out-of-pocket before their benefits kick in. Their inability to offer coverage has prevented them from hiring full time sales employees and growing their business.

**RESHONDA YOUNG** works for the family business her father Levorn started 20 years ago in Iowa. Alpha Express includes transportation, delivery, and industrial maintenance and cleaning. She has struggled to find quality, affordable health insurance to cover employees, including her brother who recently relocated his family and needs health coverage to take a role in the business.

(more)
Ms. Karen Ignagni (President and CEO)
America’s Health Insurance Plans
601 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
South Building Suite 500
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Ms. Ignagni:

America’s Health Insurance Plans is holding its national Fall Forum at the Renaissance Hotel on Tuesday, November 17. It is our understanding that you will be attending the event. We – the undersigned – are small business owners from around the country, whose livelihoods have been harmed or are at risk because of the health insurance industry; we will be at the same hotel that afternoon, and we request the opportunity to meet with you.

Some of us are or were customers of the major health insurance companies represented by your lobbying organization; others have been forced to choose to not offer our employees health care coverage because of your health insurance companies’ through-the-roof premiums. We believe it is important for you to hear firsthand the ways in which the entities you represent have cost our businesses growth and hurt our families’ and our employees’ health.

Our businesses are facing dire choices—between being able to reinvest profits into the future of our businesses and meeting the ever-growing costs of health care coverage; between denying our employees coverage for needed medical services and having to cut their jobs entirely.

While only eight of us will be at the Renaissance on Tuesday, we represent the diversity of small businesses harmed by health care— we run restaurants; we sell goods including t-shirts and auto parts; we offer services to our communities like catering, martial arts classes, and communications training. We speak for the millions of business owners around the country who have seen the future of their business come down to the cost of health care coverage.

Ms. Ignagni, we are not simply opportunities for profit. We are people trying to provide for our families, contribute to our local economies, and make ends meet in this recession, who believe you should look us in the eye, hear our stories, and understand what you are lobbying against.

We plan to be at the Renaissance Hotel at noon on Tuesday and hope to see you there. Please understand that we are not interested in discussing these issues with a representative or spokesperson. With our livelihoods on the line, we feel the least you could do is participate in this meeting personally.

Sincerely,

David Borris of Hell’s Kitchen Catering, Northbrook, IL
Kay Forbes-Smith of KFS Power, Evansville, IN
Alton Johnson of AJ Body Shop, North Little Rock, AR
Rick Poore of Design Wear, Lincoln, NE
Meredith Stolper of The Loaf and Ladle, Exeter, NH
Mecheall Williams of Subchaser Inc., Bossier, LA
Jan Wood of JP Wood Martial Arts, Palatine, IL
ReShonda Young of Alpha Express, Inc., Waterloo, IA

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