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Utah lawmakers debate federal healthcare reform

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A legislative debate about federal health care reform stayed calm Wednesday -- unlike town hall gatherings in some states -- with all speakers invited by lawmakers to present their arguments.

The most heated moments before the Health and Human Services Interim committee came when Judi Hilman, a proponent for reform and head of the Utah Health Policy Project, and Sen. Chris Buttars, who calls the proposals now before Congress "socialism," disagreed about the meaning of language in one congressional bill.

"You don't believe this is inserting government in every aspect of health care,?" asked Buttars, R-West Jordan.

"No, I don't," Hilman said, adding, "Government created the roads that got us here safely today. I don't think government is all bad."

Representatives of the Utah conservative think tank the Sutherland Institute, said the real solution is "authentic charity care" -- a proposal shot down by Rep. Christine Johnson, D-Salt Lake City.

"I heard a lot of theory and good wishes," she said. "I hear nothing factually based that allows me to believe that your proposed system has any merit."

Orem resident Diane Knight spoke in favor of reform. She said she doesn't want a hand out, but she does want the ability to buy insurance.

She said she and her husband have been unable to qualify for insurance because both have had cancer. Her daughter was initially denied a policy, and referred to the state high risk pool, because she had previously filled a prescription for acne medication.

Knight said she recently closed her 23-year-old, home-based preschool business and became a public kindergarten teacher so that she could get insurance.

"I had to turn my life upside down in order to gain health insurance. Health insurance runs my life," she said, adding that it causes her more fear and anxiety than cancer did.

Utah's health care reform task force met later in the day and was slated to discuss federal health reform, but put off that discussion.

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