

NY Health Act Testimony  
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As the President of the Greater Catskills Young Farmers Coalition, a chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition, I am here and humbled to represent our farmer members who have offered their lived experiences and struggles to access sufficient, affordable health care during roundtable discussions with congressional and senate representatives, as well as meetings and social gatherings. It is harrowing to hear the profusion of similar anecdotes related to how the dearth of reasonable health care options impedes small business operations, personal well-being, family dynamics, and financial security of such brilliant, community-building farmers who nourish their neighbors and the land with courageous persistence. It is even more harrowing to admit that the group often finds relief and comfort in the fact that each of us is not alone in or personally culpable for failure in this inordinately pernicious system.

Humans are constrained by the availability of nutrition and energy, clean air, and drinkable water. Each of these limiting factors are related to seeds: the plants they yield, as well as the myriad animals, fungi, bacteria, and ecosystem services that are sustained by such plants. Yet, those young farmers whose life work is dedicated to the planting and saving of seeds; the harvesting of plants, animals, milk, and eggs; and therefore to the stewarding of the fundamental ability of humans to meet their existential needs, are systematically denied equitable access to healthcare. This is a shameful paradox that captures the zeitgeist of US and NY healthcare. Young farmers toil to protect and provide the essential elements we could not exist without. In this way, young farmers are the most foundational of healthcare practitioners and service providers. Yet, they are prevented from obtaining accessible, appropriate physical and mental care.

Concurrently, the average age of NY farmers is rising rapidly (currently in the late 50's) and the state is hemorrhaging farmland as it becomes degraded, developed, or gobbled up by the commercial farm oligarchy. Meanwhile, climate change is precipitating the onslaught of pest, disease, invasive species, drought, flooding, and frost complications that contribute to crop failures and further deterioration of precarious farm profit margins. While there is an emergence of young, educated, ecologically-minded farmers, the interwoven barriers experienced by this cohort, including land access, student loan debt, affordable housing, climate change, and health insurance, force these farmers out of agriculture and deter potential farmers from pursuing agriculture. At the convergence of these trends is a veritable threat to the state's food security--further than what is already being experienced by structurally marginalized folks facing food apartheid. However, providing comprehensive, universal health coverage for every New Yorker is a pivotal component of the change needed to build a more ecologically resilient, socially just, and food secure NY.

Regenerative farming is an ecological and moral imperative that I am arbitrarily lucky enough to engage in. Currently, I manage the farm at Frost Valley YMCA, a non-profit organization that offers employees incredible health benefits. Still, I have bold aspirations to operate a commercial farm of my own in NYS. I often ruminate on this farm of the future and struggle to envision the day where I can work full-time there. I think of the experiences of my farmer friends who are confined to two poles: at one end, many are discouraged from improving and scaling up their businesses out of the need to meet working poor income qualifications continually unsure if they will still be farming next year, and at the other end, some are penalized for being successful at nourishing more people and stewarding the environment as they are limited to egregiously expensive health care options.

As it is the farmers who sow the seeds of our survival, I implore you to more deeply understand the value of their work and consider comprehensive, universal health coverage for every New Yorker as if our collective existence depends on it. Because it does. So, I close my testimony today by thanking you for the tremendous work you do while acknowledging that it is made possible by the farmers who provide your means of subsistence.

I'm able to share my story because of access to affordable health care. Without it, I might be dead.

I was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer the same day Donald Trump was elected president. The minute he took office, I was in constant worry that I would lose my health insurance which I was only able to obtain because of the Affordable Care Act and expanded Medicaid. I continue to receive treatment to this day, and without affordable health care, my future is uncertain.

In 2016, at age 35, I started Grass + Grit Farm along with two partners. We raise pastured and grass fed livestock in New Paltz, New York. We believe in providing our community with delicious and nutrient dense food while enriching soil with regenerative practices such as intensive rotational grazing. We're willing to do the hard work to make this possible despite meager pay. We love this work, but even the most minor of injuries or sickness can derail our business quickly. After my diagnosis, I was unable to participate in 90% of farming activities for a full season. If I didn't have access to affordable care, that would have been it. The business might have collapsed, and all our hard work wasted.

Cancer aside, our profession is well known for being one of the most dangerous. It's also known to have some of the highest rates of drug/alcohol addiction and suicide.

Health care is essential to our success in the state of New York. Challenges abound in small scale agriculture. Access to health care should not be one of them.

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