

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to this important issue.

My name is Rev. Emily McNeill. I'm an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and the executive director of the Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State. We work with individuals and groups representing faith, labor and community to advocate for economic, social and racial justice in New York State.

Over the past 6 months, you have listened to hours of testimony describing the life-threatening barriers to health care that New Yorkers face and the physical, emotional, and financial toll this takes. The evidence of how people are suffering within the current system is clear. The question is how our state government will respond.

In listening to some of the previous hearings, I have heard legislators question whether government should be trusted with the responsibility of administering a single-payer health system. I've found this attitude troubling, especially coming from those with leadership roles in government. The reality is that government is the only entity with the capacity and the mandate to respond to the crisis that we've heard described.

I want to take a step back for a moment to remember what the role of government is. We have a government because we believe we are more than just a collection of individuals or families. We are a society, which means that we have obligations to one another. It means that we share a common interest in a common good. Government is the structure that we the people set up to define and protect that common good.

Much of the Bible is about precisely this - how a society should organize itself to establish justice and fairness and to protect the most vulnerable. The founding documents of the United States also speak to this. The Declaration of Independence describes the mission of government as protecting "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

It is difficult to think of anything that more directly impacts a person's chance at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness than their ability to access quality health care. In fact, our New York State Constitution articulates clearly in Article 17, Section 3 that health care is a responsibility of government. "The protection and promotion of the health of the inhabitants of the state are matters of public concern and provision therefore shall be made by the state."

New York State has an obligation to protect the health of its residents that it is failing to meet. Private insurance companies on the other hand, have no obligation to serve New Yorkers, and New Yorkers have little to no ability to exert influence over them. Whatever the shortcomings of state government, they do not justify the abdication of your responsibility to the people of this state. You have a duty to ensure access not just to health insurance but to health care for every resident.

I want to close with a quote from a letter signed by 337 clergy and faith leaders from throughout New York State advocating for passage of the New York Health Act, which Labor-Religion Coalition submitted to this body in May:

“These inequities in our health care system are unnecessary and immoral. Providing comprehensive health care to every New York resident is not only possible, it would cost less. Most importantly, it would prevent needless suffering and death.

How we care for the sick is one of the most basic tests of our society's character. New York can and must do better. We call on you to join the fight to pass the New York Health Act this year.”