

Aswini Periyasamy - 10.23 Testimony for New York Health Act

Hello esteemed Senators and Assembly Members. My name is Winn Periyasamy and I'm a board member with Physicians for a National Health Program's NY Metro Chapter, a health advocate, and a 1L student at Fordham Law School.

Like many in my age group, I was lucky enough that my first personal experience with underinsurance didn't come until I turned 26 and had to leave my parents' health insurance. Two job transitions and several months later, I found myself on Affordable Care Act insurance while studying for the LSAT and applying for jobs.

Like many people, I don't remember when I didn't live with depression. But that part of my life was particularly hard - the LSAT can make or break your law school prospects. At the same time, I was on my third job hunt in a year and a half. There were nights I just couldn't stop crying. Nights that I crashed with friends because I couldn't eat without throwing up. On nights I couldn't bear to reach out to a loved one, I would call Thrive NYC's Crisis hotline and talk through the worst moments. More than once, Thrive counselors would give me a list of therapists who took my insurance - and would ask whether I had connected with a therapist since I had last called. It makes sense - hotlines aren't designed to be healthcare. But I also couldn't say that I had connected to a counselor - while resources like Thrive and ZocDoc can, on paper, help find people that are "in your network", often times we find that the therapist may not actually accept your insurance in network, does not have appointments for weeks, is not actually affordable for your wallet. As a result, I only had a Crisis Hotline to get me through one of the hardest times in my life.

Lawyers have the fifth highest suicide rate in the country and more than half of all lawyers experience depression at one point in their careers. But mental health issues AND trouble accessing care have touched the lives of all of us, regardless of profession. I'm glad I'm still here. Many people aren't.

Luckily, I had savings that lasted me through my job hunt, loved ones who I could rely on if I needed financial support, and I could afford to continue health coverage until I was covered by an employer. We're not all that lucky. We all have known or seen folks who suffer debilitating mental and physical health issues who don't have those resources - in fact, the system regularly leaves them homeless, without healthcare, and/or even incarcerated.

This is why I left a field I love and transitioned into law school to add a JD to my advocacy toolkit - I want to serve those who aren't as lucky as I have been. In particular, I want to be an immigration lawyer - I want to ensure that when people like my parents come to this country, with documents or not, that they have one more lawyer on their side who can help them navigate a complex immigration system to achieve their American dream. But I don't want to be a lawyer in a system that prohibits immigrants from getting a visa because they cannot afford healthcare. I don't want to be a lawyer in a system that confuses and frightens immigrants from using health, housing, and food programs - programs that could keep them healthy and whole - in an attempt to avoid a public charge determination that could jeopardize their family's ability to stay together. I don't want to work in a legal system that criminalizes poverty and lack of health. I'm frightened to think that I will have to - not for myself but for the clients who I hope to help welcome to our community.

In school, we're regularly asked whether a case is still "good law". We should ask ourselves whether this current healthcare system is "good policy". And we can't just stop at "good policy", at incremental change. While I agree with certain incremental steps such as expanding the Essential Plan to include undocumented low-income immigrants, I don't believe in incremental change forever. We leave people behind when we make incremental progress. Why can't we fight for everything we deserve?

Don't leave behind the 1 million New Yorkers living without insurance. Don't leave behind the countless more suffering underinsurance. Don't leave my future clients behind. I urge you all to pass the NY Health Act this session.