

5:10-00
SEIU Conference

SEIU Upstate Nurses Conference (Transcript)

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What I'd like to do is talk for a few minutes and then I'd like to hear from all of you. Because you're the people here on the front lines and you know far better than I. What is happening in our hospitals, in our nursing homes, what is happening in the emergency room, the operating room, the bedside, the patients, what's happening with all of the very ...that you provide care for people.

I think it is important that we hear directly from the experts. You know my late mother-in-law was a nurse and a very proud nurse. Some of you may remember, unfortunately she left us far too soon, the year of Bill became President. For every morning of her life that he was able to remember, and certainly all the years that I knew her, she was up at about 4:30, she had to get up a little early to put on her false eyelashes... "Your going into the operating room," her job was to put people out. "Why do you get up so early and work so hard to make yourself look so good just to put people to sleep," and she said, " I want the last site that they see, is me..."

She also knew that moments like that are scary, vulnerable times for people and that being there with a kind word and a pair of hands was essential to the out come. I know that, not because I've ever done this, but because I have a lot of friends who are nurses and I've studied what nursing means and I have said for several years that every single piece of evidence we've got points in one direction. That the quality of nursing, largely determines the out come of the patient.

I'm here to recognize and thank you, but I am also here to talk about some of the challenges that you and the union and I met with some of the hospital administrators before I came in, that all of us face. And continue to provide quality affordable health care and particularly quality nursing care.

We have made a lot of progress in the last seven years and I am very grateful and proud of that progress. I'm really proud of my husband and the work he has done. I think that we are a better country. Don't you? We do have strongest economy in

a generation gap, lowest unemployment in 29 years. We not only have been creating new jobs, but we put people to work who used to be... We know how to create jobs, and get our economy moving, but we haven't done it everywhere. Our very success has caused us some problems.

Now what do I mean by that? Well clearly here in Upstate New York, we have not realized the real benefits of our economic success. One of the issues that I want to work on is to make sure that we... that economic prosperity for every part of New York, to every community. So that people can have and keep their jobs all over the place.

This also means that as we have a lower and lower unemployment rate, now the last count is at 3.9%. So a lot of people who are not... to go into the most important professions that we have in our country. We don't have enough nurses. Our ends are... you know that. We don't have, and are about to pay the price for, is teachers. The two most important jobs any of us that are parents have, are teaching our children ... create opportunities for more people to become nurses, and we have to figure out how to award those of you who are nurses. Not only with compensation, but also with the respect and the working conditions they do deserve.

I believe that the problems that we face as a nation are really capable of being solved. If I didn't believe that I wouldn't be running for this job. I believe that people of good faith who are willing to roll up their sleeves work together, could solve our problems. And that we can look to our common values of community and opportunity and responsibility and enterprise.

We could bring those values to work and really make a difference. And when I look at our health care system I know that we have a range of talent - number one: you see it everyday. We have a growing number of uninsured. And there is a growing number of underinsured. And we have an incredible amount of time being spent by doctors and nurses arguing with insurance companies about paying for the care that you know your patients need! And what really bothers me is that in most hospitals the fastest growing departments are not the nursing departments, not the physician ranks, not any of the special services but the billing departments. Why?

Because hospitals have to hire more and more people to have that interface with insurance companies to try to get paid. The

same thing is happening in doctors' offices. Money that should go to compensate qualified nurses are going either to put nurses to work taking care of bookkeeping issues or hiring other people. So, we are faced with a very important challenge. How do we cut the number of the uninsured, increase the insurance coverage for those who are insured, provide the legislative support for doctors and nurses - that's why I support a Patient's Bill of Rights - and keep providing quality, affordable, acceptable health care.

I've been on the board of a hospital - a children's hospital - and I know that these are challenges that we face across the country but we have a particularly acute set of issues to face here in New York.

If we are committed, though, I think we can make progress. And here's what I would do in the Senate. You may recall I had a few things to say about health care back in 1993 and 1994 and I still believe in the goals of quality, affordable health care for everyone. But I also now come from the school of smaller steps because we have to get done what we can get done. And we've accomplished some important steps in the last several years. We have expanded children's health insurance to everybody in the working area that has a certain income. But we have to do more in order to cover all of our children. We have made some real progress in making insurance affordable.

But here's the agenda that still confronts us. Number one - we do have to pass a strong Patient's Bill of Rights that includes critical protection guaranteeing access to needed health specialists, to emergency room services, to continuity of care protection and to a fair appeals process. And I don't understand why the Congressional Republicans have been standing in the way of this Patient's Bill of Rights. I hope it passes this year. If it doesn't it is something that I will work on with Chuck Schumer next year. I'll also fight for the... Trust Fund for the next quarter century and to insure that Medicare includes a prescription drug benefit.

Many of you know better than anyone that you have patients all the time getting prescriptions that cannot afford to fill them. You have patients who get prescriptions that say, "Take four pills a day" and they take two thinking they can make it last longer not knowing it won't do them any good. I have people coming up to me - not just elderly people but other people as

well - all the time saying, "Look at my prescription drug bill. There is no way I can afford that."

So, Medicare needs to include prescription drug benefits but, you know, prescription drug costs are really too high for all of us. It's not just our parents and grandparents on Medicare: Their costs are going up 10% to 15% a year and it isn't right that we American consumers pay the highest costs for these drugs in the entire world because we have already paid for them. Our tax dollars go to create those drugs.

We're sending dollars to the NIH and the universities to do the research that pharmaceutical companies turn into drugs. And then we support with our tax dollars the FDA which tests these drugs and tells us whether they are safe. And then we, after having paid with our tax dollars, we pay the highest costs for those same drugs. Now, here in New York we know that you can get American-made and American-approved drugs cheaper in Canada than you can here.

I was over at the hospital at the University of Rochester and I said, "I just want to make it a level playing field." So, I would introduce and fight for legislation that would permit us to re-import from Canada American drugs. This legislation would make prescription drugs more affordable by allowing American pharmacists and health care institutions and distributors to import FDA-approved prescription drugs that meet the safety standards from Canada into the United States.

I've also been very concerned and have spoken out about the changes that are being imposed on nursing. During the next five to ten years the number of RN's who may be in the labor force could exceed the number of new entrants that's coming into the field. Now, that would result in an unprecedented nursing shortage. And that nursing shortage, I know, is making many of you work way too many hours without any breaks, without any support.

That's not good for you. That's not good for the quality of nursing and it's not good for patients. So, it is not something that we can take lightly. That's why in the Senate you can count on me to expand the opportunities for professional involvement and practice on behalf of nurses to help ease this shortage.

Over the past several years I have been privileged to work with the American Nursing Association in Washington. I have addressed the national convention several times and I have put forth ideas and worked with nurses about what we can do to give nurses more authority over your profession so that you can have an opportunity to make the decisions that will help patients receive quality health care. Now, part of how we do that is to be a strong and steady champion of organized labor and of workers' rights. And this a big difference between Democrats and Republicans.

There has been a concerted effort in the Congress to undermine the efforts that have gone on for a hundred years to provide protections for those of you in the workforce and, particularly, to try to undermine organized labor. Well, to me, I want to be a very strong advocate of those protections because it is good, not only for those who are working, it is good for those you are taking care of. So you can count on me being a strong and effective champion not only for New York's nurses in the Senate but for the right of New York nurses to organize and bargain and fight for what...

I think we also have to do more to recruit people into nursing. And I would like to see the legislation that we used back in the 1960's reinvigorated....so that we would be able to offer scholarships and loans and debt forgiveness to young people willing to become doctors and nurses because we don't have enough.

I also will fight very hard to improve health care for children and adolescents and I will fight hard to provide more support for mental health because right now you know so well that we are not treating diseases of the mind the same way we treat diseases of any other organ of the body.

I said something about this yesterday at a speech in New York City in front of newspaper publishers and I then sat down for lunch. And a young woman came up to me, introduced herself and said she was a nursing student from Oregon and she had just finished her rotation at the Adolescent Psychiatric Center in Portland, Oregon. And she thanked me for mentioning it. She said, "I see so many problems of young people that are not being addressed because they are not identified or because their parents don't have insurance that covers it or because we've cut back on public support for mental illness."

It is something I'm hearing about as I travel around the state. I met a man the other day who told me about his ten-year old son who is autistic. He said, "You know, I have an insurance policy from work. I've had the same policy from the same employer for many years. I never realized until my son was born what it would cost to care for an autistic child. I can't afford it. I don't get any help with that. If my son had a heart condition, I'd get help with it but he's got autism. I don't get... help with it."

I was in a diner not so long ago and a man told me about his 19 year old daughter who was just diagnosed as schizophrenic "You know," he said, "I don't have any coverage for that and I've been going from place to place trying to get somebody who will take her in and help her." Every time I speak to groups of high school or college students somebody either in the public meeting or afterwards will say to me, "Mrs. Clinton, there are so many people - (I never know whether the young person are talking about themselves or talking about a friend) - there are so many people who have depression, anxiety, problems and nobody to talk to and nowhere to go." So, this is a big issue also and it's something that you see because those of you who are not in psychiatric nursing you know that many of the problems that patients bring to you have been compounded by depression or other kinds of issues - addiction, alcoholism, whatever. So, we have to look at the entire person when we think about nursing somebody and taking care of a patient.

You know, on Sunday we are having a Million Mom March in Washington and I wish everybody here a happy Mother's Day. I was just over at...barbecue ...and it was great and one of the women there told me that she's coming with about 200 other women from Syracuse to march in the march. And I was talking with her and she said, "You know, we've got to do something about guns. It's a big health problem." Think about that. It is. It is a public health problem. It's not just a question of a law enforcement problem (of course, it is that) but it's also a public health problem. And those of you who are on the front lines see those people coming into emergency rooms with gun shot wounds who have to hold somebody's hand who is losing a child because of self-inflicted or accidental or deliberate gun shots you know the health problem.

And the final health problem that I would mention because I

think it is important for you and your profession and through the union to be advocates on behalf of these issues because I know you care not just about working conditions and compensation and the things that you fight for in contract but you care about health or you wouldn't be in this profession and that's the issues that we are starting to study about environmental health. As we look at the state and we see these hot spots of cancer, we have some hard questions to ask ourselves. Why is it that there are parts of New York State that have a higher than average rate of cancer? It is something that I think we have to really spend a lot of time and research getting into to figure out what's actually going on there.

There are so many questions and challenges that we face when it comes to health. And we cannot answer any of them without a high quality, well trained, motivated nursing force. So, for me, the work you do is not only important in and of itself, and I not only thank you and recognize you today for that, but it is part of our overall challenge of how we are going to try to provide the healthiest possible condition for people from their earliest years to their later years. And that means doing everything possible to get young mothers the pre-natal health care they need all the way to getting the best quality health care and hospices and nursing homes and hospitals at the end of life. And I'm very grateful to you because when you're needed, you're there and most people are so grateful for it. And what I want to do is be your advocate in Washington to make sure everybody understands the importance of what you do. Thank you...