



by Margarita Tapia

Agents Storm Capitol Hill for Health Care Fly-In

More than 1,000 agents voice support for reform but object to government-run plan.

In July more than 1,000 professional health insurance advisors, agents, brokers, consultants and employee benefit specialists met with more than 400 Senate and House offices as part of the Health Insurance Agent & Broker Alliance health care reform fly-in on Capitol Hill.

The Big “I” worked with other health producer associations to form the Health Insurance Agent & Broker Alliance, which consists of: the Big “I,” AHIA-NAIFA Health and Employee Benefits (AHIA), The Council of Insurance Agents & Brokers (CIAB), the National Association of Health Underwriters (NAHU) and the National Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors (NAIFA).

Big “I” members came to the Hill representing two viewpoints in the health care debate: as health care advisors to consumers and as small business owners. Fly-in participants had meetings with their representatives in Congress on the critical role professional health insurance agents and brokers play in providing health care to millions of Americans. They emphasized the need to maintain and expand both choice and access, reduce health care costs and improve health care quality.

When the idea of the joint fly-in was conceived, the Alliance hoped to get 400 participants total from the five associations, but expectations were exceeded more than twofold when more than 1,000 agents and brokers from 49 states attended.

Brian Baker, vice president of Bouchard Insurance in Clearwater, Fla., said he thought the fly-in was “great” and “enjoyed meeting so many colleagues.” The enthusiasm and energy at the breakfast hosted by the alliance prior to the pilgrimage to Capitol Hill reflected Baker’s sentiment. Baker said he thought “the members of Congress were impressed with how many people showed up. There was good attendance, and I think that helped.”

Steve Spiro, president of Spiro Risk Management, Inc. in

Valley Stream, N.Y. and a member of the Big “I” government affairs committee, met with several offices and emphasized that “there are too many uninsured people, and yes, reforms are needed, but we should not be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” Spiro stressed the importance of not rushing the process but instead to ensure it’s done correctly.

As the House and Senate debate comprehensive health care reform legislation, the joint grassroots fly-in provided an opportunity for the health insurance agent and broker community to send a strong message to Congress to preserve the private delivery of health insurance and to oppose the creation of a government-run public plan.

The House unveiled its version of reform while the Senate continues to move forward on a dual track with bills in both the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) and the Committee on Finance.

In addition to the “Alliance,” whose collective memberships represent more than 500,000 professional health insurance advisors, agents, brokers, consultants and employee benefit specialists, many in the health care and business communities are concerned that a public plan will lead to diminishing quality in health care that leaves taxpayers holding the bag.

Spencer Houldin, principal of Ericson Insurance in Washington Depot, Conn. and chairman of the Big “I” government affairs committee, said taxpayers will end up paying for a government-run program. “This country is built on capitalism and choice, but a government-run program would end up being subsidized,” says Houldin. He is concerned that the current language in the bill would “force people to go to the government plan.”

The grassroots fly-in could not come at a better time with health care reform front and center in both the House and the Senate.