

Sanders' Health-Care Plan

Congressman Plans To Submit Legislation This Week

By DAN BILLIN

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WHITE RIVER JUNCTION — U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders said yesterday he would be willing to travel the country to promote a bill he plans to submit this week calling for a national health-care system.

Sanders, a freshman independent who won his Vermont seat by bashing both Republicans and Democrats, acknowledges that his bill will face long odds in Congress. He doesn't belong to either party's caucus, and even if he mustered a majority behind his bill, President Bush "would veto it the next day," he said.

His strategy for a promotional tour would be classic Sanders, however: confrontational rather than currying favor. Sanders said he would target the districts of congressmen who don't support his bill and would point out to constituents that their representatives oppose health-care reform.

Speaking before a crowd of more than 100 people at the Bugbee Senior Center, Sanders said his bill calls for a ban on private medical insurance and the establishment of a government-sponsored insurance program very similar to the Canadian model. He disclosed few details of his bill, but said the plan would cover all citizens and would pay 100 percent of the cost of all health care — including psychiatric treatment.

Sanders said his bill calls for individual states to adopt their own health-care systems under federal guidelines — a tactical approach that aims at circumventing opposition at the federal level. After one state adopted the plan and others saw how well it worked, the movement would snowball, he said.

Sanders got an enthusiastic response from the crowd, which included senior citizens, health-care



Valley News — Geoff Hansen

Helen Ilsley of Thetford Center applauds speeches calling for national health-care insurance.

professionals and labor union representatives. "Don't get discouraged, Bernie," said a man who identified himself only as a Brattleboro resident. "We know it's going to take a long time, but we're all behind you."

The Sanders bill was also endorsed by three of Windsor County's Democratic state legislators: Sen. Cheryl Rivers of Stockbridge, Sen. Dick McCormack of Bethel, and Rep. Ann Seibert of Norwich.

Rivers has already proposed her own state bill to set up the sort of health-care system called for in Sanders' bill. The bill, which is scheduled for hearings this summer,

would have the state guarantee a comprehensive plan of medical benefits, including long-term and dental care, she said.

Like Sanders' proposal, Rivers' bill would create a single-provider system to cut down on duplication of costs such as administration. Unlike the Sanders' bill, however, Rivers' plan would allow the state to put the benefits package out to bid to a private contractor.

Sanders praised both the Rivers initiative and a recent petition drive by Vermont physicians calling for health-care reform at the state and national levels. He repeatedly cited newspaper ads in which the petition appeared, declaring, "The momentum is with us."

Sanders and Rivers both said that U.S. Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., is sympathetic to the idea of trying out a government health-care system in Vermont.

"Our state is probably leading the country in developing the concept for a single health-care payer system," Sanders said. "When Vermont goes forward and does the right thing, the citizens of New Hampshire are going to be talking to their government."

Several senior citizen activists crossed the Connecticut River yesterday to hear Sanders talk, including Earl Bourdon of Claremont. "I come from New Hampshire," Bourdon said by way of explaining his presence. "I want to see what a real congressman looks like."

Bourdon agreed with Sanders that the American system needs to be completely revamped, and compared the current situation to the old story of the Dutch boy and the leaky dike. "Our health-care system has gone to hell," he said. "We don't need another kid with his finger in the hole. We need a whole new dike."