

HOUSE BILL 406 – TESTIMONY OF THE MONTANA NURSES’ ASSOCIATION
House Appropriations Committee – February 8, 2007

“An act expanding access to health care services by establishing a grant program for Community Health Centers... [and] providing an appropriation . . .”
Introduced by Representative Edith Clark

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, for the record my name is Don Judge and I’m here today on behalf of the Montana Nurses’ Association in support of House Bill 406.

The Montana Nurses Association urges you to support HB 406. And in evidence of our support, I’m going to provide a statement from Patricia Carrick, MN, FNP, a Family Nurse Practitioner and a member of the Montana Nurses Association, Council on Practice & Government Affairs.

As Ms. Carrick so eloquently points out, one of the greatest failures of our country is the lack of health care access for a substantial percentage of our population. In Montana it is estimated that at least 20% of the population is completely uninsured, while another 20% are significantly underinsured.

In many cases, despite the presence in a family of two adults with as many as two jobs apiece, the high costs of insurance premiums, deductibles and co-pays make even the most routine of health maintenance services completely unaffordable. In other families where one or both parents struggle with un- or underemployment, or where a single parent struggles to provide for self and children alone, health care is considered an impossibility for any but the most acute or disabling problems. And too often the unlucky family that encounters such problems often faces bankruptcy as a result. In fact, health care crises are thought to be the single most frequent cause of personal bankruptcy in America.

In this setting, the Federally Qualified Community Health Center system has, for many years, provided the only available “safety net”. Through a complex combination of federal funds, private payments, insurance and grants, Community Health Centers serve millions of American citizens with primary medical and dental care, mental health support and services for both urban and rural homeless citizens.

Montana is lucky to have active CHCs right now serving Montanans across the State. But Montana has thousands of citizens who have no access to these Community Health Centers, and many CHCs struggling to extend even more desperately needed services. Our distances are huge, our population widely distributed, and our most vulnerable, our poorest with the least resources for travel and access remain at risk. It is no secret that poverty among Montana’s rural areas is greater than in our urban communities, and the rural areas are among the greatest in need for access to health care.

In these areas as well as in our cities and towns there exists a crushing need for increased availability of dental care and mental health services. Too often they exist at not much more than a crisis level. Something needs to be done.

America has stretched its military presence around the globe and at the same time faced unprecedented natural disasters here at home making competition for scarce federal dollars increasingly difficult. However, it remains possible to compete for new clinic and expansion site federal dollars and one advantage Montana has is its ability to demonstrate its many successes. In such competition it can be the existence of an established system for delivery of services which provides a convincing competitive edge in the grant application process.

HB 406 provides an opportunity for Montana to support its successful established clinics with their strong records of effective, efficient services by expanding those services in areas of greatest need. And, it offers the opportunity for new CHC starts in needy parts of the State where no services currently exist. In both cases, the possibility of success in transitioning from State dollars to federal funding is good, based on our history and the ongoing federal commitment to Community Health Clinics. And, in both cases, the technical support of the State Primary Care Association can be crucial in that success.

But, in order to achieve the goals of providing current services, expanding current services and opening CHC's in Montana's areas of greatest need, we need the seed capitol to get the ball rolling. That's where HB 406 comes in.

Although the 2 million dollar per year price tag may seem by some to be high, the truth is that delay or deferral of necessary health care can result in much greater costs, both in terms of actual dollars spent to address health problems when they become crisis rather than preventative, and in terms of human suffering. Montana currently has the money to do something about that, and you have the power to make that happen.

HB 406 deserves your positive endorsement to promote equitable access to health care services for all Montanans and we urge you to give it your strong support. Thank you.

The Montana Nurses Association (MNA) is the state professional association for registered nurses. Our mission is to promote professional nursing practice; to represent professional nurses; to provide nursing leadership in promoting public access to high quality health care; and to advocate for the health and well-being of our most vulnerable populations.