

SENATE JUDICIARY
Exhibit No. 12
Date 2-5-07
Bill No. SB 323

CITY-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

115 4th Street South • Great Falls, MT 59401 • 406-454-6950

February 5, 2007

The Honorable Jesse Laslovich, Chairman
Senate Judiciary Committee
Montana State Senate
Helena, MT 50620

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 323 - Limit Duration of Certificate of Public Advantage

Dear Chairman Laslovich and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

My name is Cherry Loney and I am Director of the Cascade City-County Health Department in Great Falls. Within the Health Department is a community health center clinic that provides basic health and dental care for the poor and medically indigent. I address you from the perspective of these low-income, largely uninsured members of our community and ask you to vote in favor of Senate Bill 323.

One of the basic responsibilities of public health is to assure that all people, regardless of income or insurance, have access to health care. Compelled by community need and an alarming rate of medical indigence, the Health Department established a community health center about 10 years ago. Our mission is to provide basic health care regardless of income or ability to pay. From its fledgling start over a decade ago, the Health Department's clinic has evolved into a vital part of the community's health care safety net. Today we serve about 6000 residents annually. Our patients are largely the working poor in the community, the vast majority of whom have incomes well below federal poverty standards and most have no insurance or, in some cases, very limited coverage with a steep deductible. Our community health center clinic provides a critical point of access to basic health and dental care for these individuals. We work with, and rely on, all health care providers in the community for support and collaboration. For without which, we simply could not succeed.

Benefis Healthcare, in particular, steps to the plate. They are a strong partner with City-County Health Department and play a major role in assuring the poor in our community have access to care. The hospital provides the entire gamut of hospital-based services including lab, x-ray, emergency, inpatient care, etc. to patients of our

community health center clinic without regard to insurance status or ability to pay. In addition, they discount fees for our clinic for various diagnostics and work with us to support our clinicians offering training and information. Benefis is currently working to extend their video conferencing technology to our facility to make medical staff training even more accessible. Because of overwhelming community need, we're out of room in our facility and are also facing an unprecedented budget shortfall. The hospital has also offered funds to be matched by other community entities to expand the building. In addition, they've offered financial assistance to help with restructuring the Health Department so that we can more effectively assure long-term financial viability of the medical and dental clinic.

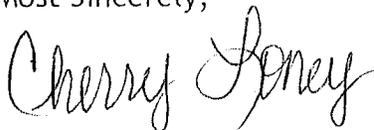
Unfortunately, the 6000 patients we care for represent only a fraction of those in need in our community. According to a 2003 University of Montana Study, about 19% of our residents are uninsured. This translates to more than 15,000 people in Cascade County without health coverage and numbers far beyond what our clinic can accommodate. Benefis steps to the plate with these individuals as well. Since they can't otherwise access health care, many of these uninsured residents seek basic health care through the hospital emergency room. Providing primary health care in an emergency room is by far the most expensive way to deliver this type of care. While very costly for the hospital, Benefis takes all comers without regard to ability to pay or insurance coverage. This extends to inpatient care and ancillary services as well. The hospital provides several million dollars in charity care annually. This is completely separate from, and in addition to, bad debt they write off and payment that cannot be collected. We know this from firsthand experience through working with the hospital as an advocate for community residents and Health Department clients.

This is why I'm asking you to vote in favor of SB 323. Along with my health center Board of Directors, I support limiting the duration of the COPA. Benefis is an asset to the community. They are a safety net hospital and a vital resource for health care for the poor. The COPA jeopardizes the hospital's continued ability to help those who cannot afford health care. We need a financially strong, non-profit community hospital to help assure our community can care for those among us with the least.

Please support Senate Bill 323 and sunset the COPA.

Thank you for your consideration.

Most Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cherry Loney".

Cherry Loney, Director
Cascade City-County Health Department