

Adjunct faculty members seek access to state health insurance

By Sarah Nathan

Adjunct professors from community colleges throughout Massachusetts recently made a compelling case to legislators for extending state health insurance coverage to part-time faculty members — many of whom juggle classes on different campuses in an attempt to eke out a living wage.

According to the Massachusetts Community College Council, there are more than 3,500 part-time instructors, and they teach more than half of the total courses offered at the state's 15 community colleges. These adjunct professors are generally paid between \$2,500 and \$2,900 per class. In some cases, they receive less than \$2,000 for courses with low enrollment.

"These part-time instructors sacrifice and persist because they love their work," MCCC President Joseph LeBlanc told the members of the Joint Committee on Public Service at a State House hearing on July 12. "They persist in a challenging work environment, and wages are just one part of the problem. Some adjunct faculty — we estimate less than 10 percent — lack health insurance."

Currently, adjunct professors, even those who teach several courses each year, are not eligible to receive health insurance from the Commonwealth, though many other part-time state workers do have access to coverage. Senate Bill 1587 would make part-time faculty members who teach four or more courses a year eligible to participate in the plans offered by the Group Insurance Commission, which provides health insurance to state workers at a shared cost.

Patricia McCauley, a registered nurse and adjunct professor in the practical nursing program at Massachusetts Bay Community College, testified that adjunct professors by far outnumber full-time faculty members. Despite the fact that the Mass. Bay program produces an estimated 100 nursing graduates each year who help alleviate the nursing shortage, she said, the state continues to ignore the health care needs of its workers.



Photo by Sarah Nathan

Members of the Massachusetts Community College Council delivered powerful testimony to legislators in July in support of a Senate bill that would extend state health insurance coverage to part-time faculty members. From left to right are Patricia McCauley, a registered nurse and adjunct nursing professor at Massachusetts Bay Community College; Mark Friedman, an adjunct economics professor at Middlesex Community College; Betsy Smith, an adjunct professor of English as a Second Language at Cape Cod Community College; and Joseph LeBlanc, president of the MCCC.

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MCCC president

"I feel the contributions made by adjunct faculty such as myself have enriched the nursing programs offered by the state and the lives of the patients who are served by our students," McCauley said. "Surely we who have devoted our lives to serving the health care needs of others have earned the right to health care benefits."

Two other part-time professors — Mark Friedman, an adjunct economics and industrial psychology professor who teaches eight or nine classes each year at Middlesex Community College, and Betsy Smith, who teaches English as a Second Language at Cape Cod Community College — also urged legislators to consider the contribu-

tions that adjunct faculty make to the state's higher education system and grant them health insurance.

Friedman spoke of the birth of his child last year, which resulted in more than \$100,000 in medical bills.

"Going forward from this experience, as we encounter medical issues we're very sensitive to medical services prices and what's covered by insurance," Friedman said.

"I was thrilled last spring when the Legislature passed legislation mandating affordable health coverage for all," Smith told the committee, referring to the new Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector program. "While the law provides admirably for those of us earning less than 300 percent of the poverty level, for those of us earning slightly over that figure, it is a disaster."

Smith added: "Who would ever have thought that I would be looking forward to turning 65 and qualifying for Medicare?"

The bill was passed favorably out of committee following

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the hearing and currently is in the hands of the Senate Ways and Means Committee.

During the hearing, Rep. Jay Kaufman (D-Lexington), who co-chairs the Public Service Committee and works as an adjunct professor, characterized the use of part-time workers as "abusive and exploitive." "The use of part-time workers has had a horrific impact on the workplace and you individually," Kaufman said. "I take your comments very seriously."

Visit www.mccc-union.org to learn more about the campaign to secure passage of Senate Bill 1587, which would provide adjunct faculty with health insurance.