

Health plan comes to Va.

By CHARLES OWENS

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BRISTOL, Va. — When asked if he would be willing to enroll his family in the same health care plan sought by his administration, President Obama didn't hesitate in his response Wednesday.

"Yes," Obama said before a crowd of invited guests assembled at the Kroger store in Bristol, Va. "As I said, this is similar to what I had when I was a member of Congress."

Obama, who chose the unlikely location of a Kroger Deli in the Southwest Virginia town to promote health care reform, joked that he had a doctor and an ambulance that followed him "everywhere" as president. However, Obama said millions of other Americans lack that luxury and have no health insurance.

As he worked to promote his health care reform plan, the president was greeted by a crowd of more than 100 protesters gathered outside the State Line Centre shopping complex. The concerned citizens were holding signs objecting to everything from health care reform and abortion to the federal cap and trade legislation now being considered by Congress.

Obama was quick to refute the argument that he was advocating a government-run health care system.

"First of all, no one is talking about a government take over of health care," Obama said. "When I drove up, I saw folks with some signs. They were riled up. If you are happy with your health care and your doctor, we are not going to change it. We are not going to change your system if you are happy with what you got. If you like your plan, you will keep it."

While the focus of Wednesday's town hall meeting was health care, Obama began the program by addressing the economy. He referred to a new issue of Newsweek magazine with a cover headline that declared, "The recession is over."

Obama also predicted the recession may be nearing an end.

"So, we may be seeing the beginning of the end of the recession," Obama said. "But that's little comfort if you're one of the folks who have lost their job, and haven't found another."

Obama said the massive federal stimulus bill passed by Congress is making a difference in putting Americans back to work. However, he warned of "a lot of miscommunication" that continues to circulate across the country about the stimulus plan.

"We are stabilizing this economy and moving forward with the action we are taking," Obama said. "I'm not going to rest until everyone without a job finds one."

Obama thanked Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., and U.S. Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., who Obama called a leader in the development of clean coal technology.

"I also want to give a special shout-out to my friend and your congressman, Rick Boucher, even if he couldn't join us today," Obama said. "He was an early supporter of my campaign, he's an important voice in our fight for health insurance reform, and he's a leader in guaranteeing that clean coal has a future as an energy source that fuels thousands of jobs here and across the country. I just want everyone to know that I love Rick Boucher."

Obama also acknowledged last week's Remote Area Medical expedition in Wise County, and joked that he hadn't been to a grocery store in a while.

"I don't get to do my own shopping and I miss it," Obama said, adding that his wife Michelle was probably going to e-mail him and ask him to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home.

"Part of the reason why we are doing this town hall at Kroger is because Kroger provides health

insurance to as many of its associates as it can," Obama said.

Kroger, which employs 326,000 associates across the nation, spends more than \$1 billion a year on health care for its employees, according to the company.

Several Kroger employees were allowed to ask Obama questions.

One employee said her mother is 90 years old, and has been told that Medicare would be phased out under Obama's health care plan.

"It isn't so," Obama said. "Nothing burns me up more than these scare tactics aimed at seniors. Let me be absolutely clear, Medicare is in place and as long as I'm here Medicare will continue to be in place. Just tell your mom nobody is messing with her doctor or her Medicare."

However, Obama warned that Medicare will be in the red within eight years if Congress doesn't take action. He said lawmakers had a "whole range of things" they can do to make the system more self-efficient.

When one speaker suggested putting the uninsured under Medicare, Obama said the cost of doing so would be overwhelming.

Obama said inaction on health care reform was no longer an option adding that premiums are now increasing faster than wages.

"We will stop insurance companies from denying you coverage because of your medical history," Obama said. "I will never forget watching my own mother, as she fought cancer in her final days, worrying about whether her insurer would claim her illness was a preexisting condition so it could get out of providing coverage. And I bet many of you have probably heard of someone who was denied insurance because they have a pre-existing condition. That will no longer be allowed."

Dozens of protesters began setting up shop early Wednesday outside of Kroger.

Several were holding signs that said "Hands off Health Care." A political candidate from Tazewell County hoisted a large sign above his car reading, "No federal cap and trade."

Clonnie Lawson of Meadowview drove a miniature vehicle that displayed a "stimulus package for poor folks" sign. He questioned why the federal government should be allowed to decide who is insured and how.

Strother Smith of Abingdon said the federal cap and trade legislation being considered by Washington was another concern. He questioned Boucher's decision to support the plan.

"If Boucher votes for national health care, he'll have two strikes," Strother said.

Several also held abortion signs. Law enforcement officers from across the region were dispatched to the shopping center in advance of the president's arrival. A large team of law enforcement officials, fire and rescue crews and even a hazardous materials response team also was stationed at the adjoining Bristol Mall.

Steady rain throughout the morning hours finally gave way to sunny skies allowing Obama to arrive on time at the Kroger store.

A stage was created for the president in the middle of the deli section of the grocery store. Television and newspaper camera crews were stationed behind a "bread and pastry" section of the grocery store. Tickets were distributed to Kroger employees who were invited to attend the town hall meeting.

Obama didn't take questions from local news media.

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