

After two local town halls focusing on Democrats' health-care reform proposal attracted more opponents than backers, advocates for a public health-insurance option took to the streets today to get their message out.

But they weren't alone. While opponents were outnumbered by roughly 3-1, about 100 foes of the government-run option countered with signs and chants of their own on the opposite street corner on Fashion Island, outside the building that houses the district office of Rep. John Campbell, R-Newport Beach.

One aspect of the debate many on both sides of the street agreed on: The current health-care system is not working well.

Among public-option proponents were demonstrators who been denied health insurance or had family members denied health insurance, usually because of preexisting conditions.

Alan Boinus, 55, said his mother, a widow, had been denied insurance because she had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She then suffered from cancer.

"She had a painful and tragic death," the Laguna Beach entrepreneur said, adding that he and his brother paid what they could for her medical care. "We lost everything. I was living in my car."

John and Rosemary Boyd, retirees from Laguna Beach, said their son is a self-employed electrician who was denied health-insurance two years ago because he'd once been a drug addict. They said he's been clean and sober now for 12 years, but his past problems were a red flag for insurance companies.

The Boyds said their son, 49, has ongoing back problems but rather than having a physician to provide an ongoing course of treatment, he gets by with visits to community clinics and occasional trips to the emergency room.

"Once they deny you insurance and you go to another company, they ask you if you've been denied before," Rosemary Boyd said of her son's fruitless pursuit of insurance.

The Boinus and the Boyds say their situations are the reason a government-run insurance option is needed – that those rejected by insurance companies need coverage they can count on.

On the other side of the street, Newport Beach's Bonnie Morrison said she sees the public insurance option as President Barack Obama's first step toward a completely government run, single-payer health system.

"He wants to go to single-payer health care," Morrison said. "But there's no way we can cover every American in this country. What would happen then is that health care would be rationed."

Corona del Mar's Dean Wickstrom, who was on Morrison's side of the street, said health care

costs could be brought under control in large measure by encouraging more competition.

“We need to allow insurance companies to sell insurance everywhere in the country,” said Wickstrom, a 68-year-old who owns an advertising and marketing business. “The whole concept of the federal government taking on issues that aren’t in the constitution ends up taking away our freedoms.”

Rosemary Boyd countered that competition alone isn’t going to address the problem of those who can’t get health insurance.

One reason public-option advocates chose the site of Campbell’s office for the event was to call for him to hold a town-hall meeting, where they could express their concerns. Another was to call on Campbell to support the public option.

Campbell has no town halls scheduled before Congress goes back to work on Sept. 8, said Campbell press aide Brent Hall.

“Mr. Campbell is strongly opposed to the public option plan and believes that it is directionally opposite from the direction we ought to be going,” Hall said. “Mr. Campbell acknowledges the need for health care reform, and is a cosponsor and has been a vocal supporter of H.R. 2520, the Patient’s Choice Act.”

Two Republican congressman representing portions of Orange County, Ed Royce and Gary Miller, have held town hall meetings on health care.

Here are some links to past stories about health care town halls in Orange County and three Dena Bunis columns on the subject.