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Contact: Donna Smith (California Nurses Association) donnas@calnurses.org 773-617-4493 or

Margaret Flowers, MD (Physicians for a National Health Program) mdpnhp@gmail.com 410-591-0892

“Baucus 13” Settle Charges

Legal charges against the “Baucus 13” were settled in a series of court hearings held earlier this week. The 13 were charged with disruption of congress after they attempted to speak on behalf of single payer universal healthcare reform at two Senate Finance Committee hearings on healthcare in May. Senator Baucus, the chair of the Finance Committee, had refused repeated requests to call witnesses who could speak on behalf of single payer universal healthcare at the May public hearings and had publicly stated that single payer healthcare reform was “off the table”.

The protesters demanded that Senator Baucus put single payer on the table. They were immediately arrested by the Capitol Police. The arrestees included 5 doctors, two nurses, an advocate for the homeless, a labor organizer and leaders of other organizations promoting universal, single payer healthcare for all Americans. Eight were arrested at the May 5 hearing and five more on May 12. The May 12 hearing also witnessed dozens of nurses—members of the California Nurses Association/ National Nurses Organizing Committee—in hospital scrubs standing in silent protest for several minutes.

The arrests sparked a public outcry and widespread media attention. In the weeks after the incident, single payer advocates were invited to testify before the Senate Health, Education and Labor (HELP) Committee as well as the House Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce and HELP Committees. Senator Baucus was forced to concede that it was a mistake to rule out a single payer plan because doing so, “alienated a large, vocal constituency and left Mr. Obama’s proposal of a public health plan to compete with private insurers as the most liberal position.” (NY Times, 6/24/09).

The actions of the Baucus 13 struck an emotional chord with a wide range of healthcare advocacy organizations. The Physicians for a National Health Program mobilized for their support. The California Nurses Association and National Nurses Organizing Committee assisted those arrested with legal support. “It seemed so wrong for registered nurses, doctors and others involved in the delivery of healthcare to be arrested while advocating for a system that would benefit patients, providers and the nation. Nurses have a professional duty to advocate for patients, and in this case, we were arrested for doing so,” said Sue Cannon, RN, of the California Nurses Association following this week’s legal actions.

Under the settlement, all charges will be dismissed after a 6 to 12 month waiting period. In a last minute burst of mean spiritedness, the prosecutor insisted that three members of the Baucus 13 who live near Washington DC also perform 40 hours of community service. "I spend every day serving my community," said defendant Adam Schneider who is employed by Health Care for the Homeless. "I'm proud of the stand we took and have no problem doing an extra 40 hours of service to my community. But if there was any justice in the world, Senator Baucus and his corporate sponsors would also be required to spend 40 hours with my clients to understand their desperate need for access to healthcare before they give a \$500 billion bailout to the private health insurance industry."

All members of the Baucus 13 vowed to continue their fight to establish healthcare as a human right for all Americans. "If Senator Baucus thinks this is over, then he just doesn't understand the strength of our movement," said Dr. Margaret Flowers, a Maryland physician. "This is just the beginning. We will not stop until every American has the right to healthcare."

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