



August 23, 2009

Big money muddies health benefit debate

House Speaker Andy Dillon's proposal to pool public employee health benefits deserves a serious, clear-eyed airing and debate in Lansing.

But for that to happen, legislators will have to fight through the blizzard of cash that has been dumped on their heads by interest groups with a stake in this issue. It's going to be pretty tough to define the public interest through all the dollars that have been spent by unions (which hate Dillon's idea) and Blue Cross/Blue Shield (a likely beneficiary of a single health plan for all public employees.)

While most of the money is flowing to Democrats, some of the contributors have been equal opportunity influence buyers.

Rich Robinson, who runs the non-partisan Michigan Campaign Finance Network, helped me understand how big the big money is in the looming debate over Dillon's plan.

His records show the unions and the Blues to be among the most "free-spending" contributors to legislative campaigns.

Since 2001, the Michigan Education Association, AFSCME, the SEIU and the UAW (which together represent the great bulk of public employees) have given \$1.25 million to House Democrats through their political action committees. They've given \$435,000 to Senate Democrats since 2003. Among those unions, only the MEA has given to Republicans, to the tune of more than \$250,000.

Blue Cross has given more than \$350,000 to House Democrats since 2001, and nearly \$90,000 to Senate Democrats since 2003. The insurance giant has also given heavily to Republicans: nearly \$250,000 to House Republicans since 2001, and \$94,000 to Senate Republicans since 2003.

"It's remarkable to me that this hasn't been more a part of the discussion up to this point," Robinson said.

"Money drives policy. And this is a lot of money. The MEA, Blue Cross and the UAW are perennially top-10 kind of contributors, in terms of the money they give in Lansing."

Because the money's flowing on both sides of the debate, and (to some extent) to both parties, it also could be difficult to see how it will drive the policy in this instance.

"If it were black or white, it would be very simple," Robinson said. "But there's some gray here, and that makes it tough."

In the ideal, perhaps the money on each side would cancel out the influence of the other, so the public's interest might peek through the middle and actually become the center point of debate.

But if you believe that's going to happen, I've got some ocean-front property to sell you -- in Ishpeming.

The money picture on this issue also is complicated by Dillon himself, who as speaker has been collecting some of the largest campaign loot from the unions and Blue Cross. If he joins the race for

governor next year (and a lot of people in Lansing believe that's one of the motivations behind his bold-stroke health plan) he'll need support from both quarters. Think they won't use that to influence him on the health plan?

Wouldn't it be great if plain old taxpayers -- Michiganders who may have lost their own jobs and benefits but continue to subsidize public employees' insurance -- had a voice that was as well amplified by money? Then again, it might be nice if despite all the cash involved, legislators were inclined to think about the pros and cons of this issue as they relate to the state's best interests.

Some will, or will try, I'm sure. But the folks throwing all this money at them don't do so without expecting something in return.

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