

April 9, 2018

Fellow members,

You don't need me to tell you that our health insurance situation is unacceptable. Ever since we lost parity on the board of the Vermont Education Health Initiative, our voice into our own health care has been dimmed. It was further dimmed when the governor and the Vermont School Boards Association last year moved to strip local school boards of their ability to negotiate directly with their local educators over health insurance.

Even though we technically retained our bargaining rights over health care, our ability – your ability – to shape what those plans look like is significantly weakened because of our single – out of five – seats on VEHI means the employer-dominated board majority can do whatever they want without us.

That is what prompted the delegates to Saturday's Representative Assembly to unanimously propose the creation of a statewide health care commission that will design and administer health benefits for all of Vermont's public school employees. ([You can read our press release and other details here.](#))

This decision didn't happen in a vacuum, and it didn't happen suddenly.

In 2016, more than 1,500 of you signed a petition asking your Vermont-NEA board to insist that VEHI give school employees and their families an equal voice on VEHI's Board of Directors. At the least, the petition urged VEHI to adopt consensus decision-making. VEHI's board majority refused to do either.

The petition further said if "VEHI is not responsive to this request or its efforts to achieve them fail" Vermont-NEA should "explore alternative ways of obtaining health coverage for its active members, retired teachers, and their families."

We all know that the current high-deductible plans you now have are causing great stress for many of you. We also know that the passage of Act 85 last year – and its call for statewide targets for cost-sharing and premium splits – intruded into what was always a local matter of bargaining.

But the truth is, we no longer have an equal voice at the most important table when it comes to your health insurance. The final decisions on the health insurance plans we have now – and that we will have in the future – remain squarely with the employer-dominated VEHI board. Our single representative on the board can't even get a second on any motion – meaning we can't even spur a discussion.

As the delegates to the RA discussed, the move to a statewide commission does not come lightly. It does mean that bargaining locally over health insurance will cease – but it also means the days of having plan design and administration solely in the hands of the VEHI board majority will also come to an end.

While I urge you to explore the details at [vtnea.org/healthcare2018](http://vtnea.org/healthcare2018), I want you to know that any statewide health care commission must achieve the following objectives:

- It will design, manage, and offer to all school employees a health benefit plan that is comprehensive, affordable, equitable and based on an employee's ability to pay.

- It will establish full equality in its governance structures and operational procedures between representatives of school boards and Vermont-NEA representatives of school employees.
- It will facilitate the transition of school employees' health benefits to a new system in such a manner that avoids further chaos in the system, is fully transparent, and responds immediately and effectively to concerns or problems arising from the transition.
- It will vigorously research and foster the implementation of rational health care cost control opportunities and ways to achieve a more efficient, patient-centric, health care system.
- It will recognize that the majority of school employees are women and not exacerbate the already unacceptable compensation gap between educational employees and other more male-dominated professions.

This is one of the most profound changes in health insurance in decades, and it comes as the balance of power at the health care table is woefully out-of-whack. It is vital that your voices carry equal weight when plans are being designed and administered.

We want to make sure that the directions we take on health care be ones that are directed by you and your fellow members. To that end, the delegates to the RA also unanimously voted for the creation of the Vermont-NEA Educator Health Care Council. The Council shall meet regularly to advise, discuss, and make recommendations on policies affecting members' health care benefits and on reforms of the health care system. The council will seek policy reforms that advance and institutionalize the principle that health care is a human right and should be provided as a public good, regardless of income, citizenship, employment status, race, gender or ability.

Most importantly, the Council shall serve as the union's primary venue for formulating health care policy positions of the union and developing member education and advocacy strategies.

We know you will have questions and concerns, and that **is why we are setting up a telephone town hall ON WEDNESDAY AT 7:30 PM with me and Mark Hage, our director of member benefits who happens to be one of the state's health care experts. I will let you know the call-in details soon.**

The delegates to the RA were clear in their ultimate goal: to regain equality at the health care table, and ensure that our health insurance plans are comprehensive, affordable, predictable, and transparent. It is time to reclaim our power on health care, and this is clearest path forward to do so.

I look forward to working with you to fixing our broken health insurance system, and ensuring that your voice is heard when it comes to your health care.

In solidarity,

Martha Allen