

Republican Senator Pat Toomey defends health care cuts in phony Town Hall event

By Samuel Davidson
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US Senator Republican Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania defended the attack on health care being spearheaded by the Trump Administration at a closed door, invite-only appearance in Harrisburg which was broadcast live on a local ABC affiliate Wednesday night.

Toomey was one of 13 US Senators which met in secrecy to craft the Senate's version of a bill to "repeal and replace" Obamacare.

The Senate bill, the "Better Care Reconciliation Act," closely mirrors a version of the bill which was passed by the House earlier this year. Among other reactionary measures the bill contains devastating cuts to Medicaid, the government health care program for the poor, disabled and elderly, effectively ending it as a guaranteed "entitlement" for the approximately 75 million Americans who currently rely on it.

While Wednesday night's event was billed as a Town Hall meeting, there were only eight carefully chosen audience members who were allowed to ask questions along with a few people patched in remotely by ABC affiliates in other parts of the state.

Hundreds of Pennsylvania residents and opponents of the health care bill were blocked from entering the television studio where the event was being staged. Six protesters were arrested while they chanted for Toomey to come outside and speak with them.

The closed character of the event allowed Toomey to present false statements about the health care bill and sidestep questions about its' impact without any opposition.

In response to the moderator's opening question referring to those protesting outside the studio and about the proposed cuts to Medicaid, Toomey said that in the Senate bill "we don't disqualify anybody from eligibility," stating that the billions of dollars in cuts to

Medicaid will establish a balance "in which the Federal Government and the state governments each pay their fair share."

In the first of the carefully screened questions, Alisa Packer of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, a clear opponent of the Senate plan, noted the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) analysis which estimates that 22 million people will lose health insurance under the Senate plan, that Medicaid would be cut by 26 percent and that tax cuts to the rich will provide \$274 billion to the top 2 percent.

"How does any of this help Pennsylvanians get better or more affordable health insurance or help to lower the cost of our medical care and prescriptions?" Packer demanded.

Toomey's response was to dismiss the CBO's estimates saying that it was based on "wildly speculative assumptions which I think are unlikely to come to pass." The moderator then quickly moved to another question without requiring Toomey to address the substance of her question, the massive tax cuts for the rich or the impact of the bill on Pennsylvania residents.

A report by the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center notes that repeal of the Affordable Care Act, commonly referred to as Obamacare, would lead to 1.1 million people in the state losing health insurance and an additional 3,425 premature deaths each year. The report also noted that over 137,000 health care providers will lose their jobs and those hospitals in urban centers and rural areas may be forced to close.

Other studies of the potential impact of both the Senate and House health care bills confirm these findings with experts pointing to the very large impact of these cuts on rural areas where hospitals, health clinics and doctors would not be able to continue.

The very next question, asked by Jeffrey Zick of Hop Bottom, a Green Party member, completely avoided Toomey's attack on health care, not even mentioning it. Instead Zick asked if Toomey would support the use of medical marijuana, for which the Senator said he would. It is telling that a member of the Green Party would be used to move the topic off of health care and the attack being spearheaded against the working class.

Having put the impact of the health care bill to bed in just the opening minutes of the event, a series of questions allowed Toomey to expand on his right-wing agenda of massive attacks on social spending, including even deeper cuts to healthcare, a vast expansion of the military, attacks on immigrants, cuts in taxes for the wealthy and cutting health, environmental and safety regulations.

In answer to a question about military spending, Toomey called for a massive increase in the already immense budget, stating, "I am in the camp that we have allowed pressure from our discretionary spending budget to undermine the resources we ought to be committing to our defense budget. We have too few ships, we have too few airplanes flying."

In response to a question about campaign finance reform pointing out that Toomey himself received 82 percent of his funding from PACs and the wealthy, Toomey deployed the same twisted logic as the Supreme Court in its *Citizens United* decision arguing that campaign finance reform would be an attack on free speech.

A number of questions brought up the opioid epidemic which is both sweeping the country and having a devastating impact in Pennsylvania.

Cregg Christy from Altoona asked what would be the cost to society as a result of cuts to opioid treatment funding contained in the Senate bill. Again Toomey was allowed to sidestep the question saying that Medicaid would be allowed to provide opioid treatment but ignoring the fact that with the massive cuts in funding under his bill, there would be less money to cover the costs of treatment.

In response to a question sent in over Facebook asking the senator why he refused to have public face-to-face Town Hall meetings, Toomey again dodged the issue insisting that he has continuous contact with people throughout the state.

Toomey's response to a question near the very end of

the event was the most revealing. Asked how he was going to live up to the Republicans' promise to cut entitlement programs, Toomey argued that the attack on Medicaid, which he is pushing in the Senate and was developed behind closed doors, should be the way to "reform," i.e. dismantle, Social Security and Medicare, two programs which are overwhelmingly popular and which millions of elderly Americans rely on to stay alive.

Referring specifically to Social Security and Medicare, Toomey complained that "they are crowding out other categories, we mentioned earlier on in the show how much the defense budget has been squeezed down. It is because of the growth of these programs."

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