

Health care pioneer

Greenfield known for persevering to make revolutionary MinnesotaCare program become law

BY DAVID MAEDA

When Rep. Lee Greenfield (DFL-Mpls) was elected 22 years ago, one of the issues he ran on was ensuring that the state's health care system took care of all Minnesotans.

For Greenfield, 58, who was active in the civil rights and anti-war efforts in the 1960s, it was just another policy issue for the underrepresented in need of political reform.

"I've always believed that everybody should be treated equally," said Greenfield, who still has a hint of a New York accent in his voice, betraying a Brooklyn upbringing.

Greenfield's political activism brought him to Minnesota to work. That activism ultimately led him to seek and win election to the House in 1978.

Perhaps the legislative achievement he will best be remembered for, and the one he still points most proudly to, is being one of the so-called "gang of seven" legislators who in 1992 helped establish MinnesotaCare, the state's health care system working toward health care access for all Minnesotans.

Greenfield was then serving as chair of the House Health and Human Services Finance Division. He worked with members from both parties and former Gov. Arne Carlson to pass the legislation that expanded the state's health coverage of the uninsured from children to all residents who did not have access to employer-supported coverage.

The group gained its nickname through tenacity in addressing the concerns raised by officials from the insurance and health care industries, among others, in the state's effort to become the first to achieve health care access to all.

The gang of seven also included DFLers Sens. Linda Berglin and Pat Piper and former Rep. Paul Ogren, and former Republican Sen. Duane Benson and Reps. Dave Gruenes and Brad Stanius.

Greenfield said Minnesota has one of the lowest uninsured rates of any state in the coun-



try — a tribute to how progressive and strong the state's system continues to be.

Since the MinnesotaCare program's inception, the rate of uninsured in the state has dropped from 6.1 percent to 5.2 percent. The national rate is around 16 percent.

Greenfield said he is confident the state will remain a leader in health care access because the state's citizens believe it is important to subsidize care for all.

With a degree in physics from Purdue University and graduate work in philosophy of science at the University of Minnesota, he said his scientific background uniquely prepared him for his legislative work and led to his interest and involvement in health care issues.

Greenfield said the scientific method values hard data over anecdote. But with the abundance of data presented in crafting legislation, he said he learned that often the use

of a personal story can be more effective in swaying legislators.

Yet in the final analysis, he said, his roots in science were useful in helping him form objective decisions.


He said that he felt fortunate to be at the leading edge of many of the causes he fought for because of the liberal nature of the area he represents, which includes parts of the West Bank, Powderhorn Park, and Seward neighborhoods in Minneapolis.

Ironically, it is Greenfield's devotion to the health care arena that has led to his decision not to seek re-election to the House.

"My interests keep narrowing," he said. "As a member you have to maintain a broad perspective."

Greenfield said that although he isn't quite sure what he will do next, he is pursuing several opportunities that will allow him to continue his commitment to health care related issues, including universal health care, from a different angle.

He said he will miss being part of the legislative process and working with many of his colleagues. And he is proud of playing a part in helping to maintain and improve the state's programs for people with disabilities, community mental health services, and expanding home health care for senior citizens.

"Many of the most exciting things I'll ever do will have been done here in this chamber," Greenfield said. 

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Lee Greenfield
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Terms: 11

Career notes: Greenfield made his name working on issues related to health and human services, and he was instrumental in the creation of MinnesotaCare, the state's health insurance program for low-income residents.