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NEWTON

11 health care protesters arrested at CIGNA offices in Newton

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Eleven health care activists were arrested on trespassing charges today as they protested in front of the CIGNA insurance office in Newton to draw attention to what they said was the insurance industry's denial of coverage to some patients.

For the second time in about three weeks, around 60 demonstrators went to the health insurance company's location on Washington Street at noon today asking CIGNA executives to sign a pledge that the company would cease practices which "deny medical coverage to their customers," said a press release from the protesters.

In response to the protest, CIGNA issued a statement, which said, in part, "Although we respect that there are different opinions on the solutions, those opinions must be based on fact. The fact is, CIGNA supports reform that will give all Americans access to quality, affordable health care coverage, and we agree that changes to the system are long overdue."

In a phone interview shortly after being released from police custody, the 11 who were arrested for trespassing said they peacefully refused to leave when police responded and were not upset or surprised that they were arrested.

"It had gotten to the point where we felt we had no other choice and had to make a statement," said protester Russ Davis, executive director of workers' rights advocates Massachusetts Jobs with Justice.

Davis said the protesters in Newton were from the Greater Boston area and ranged in age from 23 to 80. He said the rally was part of a nationwide day of protest against private health insurance companies.

"We wanted to talk with CIGNA, and we weren't going to leave until we did," said Joy DePina, 23, of Dorchester, who was arrested Thursday and had attended a previous rally at the Newton health insurance company on Sept. 22.

DePina said police were called to the previous rally when executives were also asked to sign the pledge, but no arrests were made then.

The pledge had three main points, said protesters, asking CIGNA to agree not to stand between a doctor and patient on decisions about medical procedures, not to use any resources to oppose health care reform and not to deny anyone coverage because of a pre-existing condition.

"All we're asking is for insurance companies to do their job, and to treat their customers like human beings with lives and families, not like statistics," said DePina, an organizer with Health Care for America Now. "They're arresting the wrong people. The real criminals are inside the CIGNA offices, denying vital medical services to those in need, and letting people die."

Patricia Downs, a 69-year-old, retired primary care physician from Brookline, added, "We felt it was important to make a statement. I know how hard it is to

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