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Group targets Friendly's for cut in coverage

By David Liscio
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PEABODY -- Members of a Lynn-based healthcare and fair-labor advocacy group were slated to demonstrate in front of the Friendly's restaurant along Route 114 today because the chain of eateries this week slashed medical coverage benefits for its full-time employees.

"That decision affects about 500 employees," said Liz Jackson, a spokesman for Neighbor-to-Neighbor. "We're demonstrating because we want to highlight the issue of employee responsibility for healthcare coverage."

According to Jackson, Friendly's isn't so friendly when it comes to providing insurance coverage for its workers.

"We're calling on the Legislature to quickly pass the health care reform proposal now pending at the State House, with an employer responsibility provision," said Jackson. "By putting a floor under employer health expenditures, the employer responsibility provisions halt the race to the bottom that leaves workers with no coverage and raises health care costs for everyone."

Friendly's announced the benefits reduction on Wednesday. The new company "mini-healthcare plan" covers "a maximum annual benefit of \$2,000 for outpatient care," said Jackson, noting that the amount would likely cover only a small portion of the costs associated with major illnesses.

As a result of the changes, the burden of health care has been drastically shifted from company to employees, she said.

Friendly's, which has approximately 500 restaurants and a corporate headquarters in Wilbraham, issued a written statement that explained the decision was made to control expenses.




It stated, "As healthcare costs across Massachusetts, as well as the rest of the nation, continue to dramatically increase, Friendly's has made some adjustments to the healthcare benefits for a very small percentage of our workforce. 'We are confident that our current offerings are in line with the vast majority of businesses in the restaurant industry both in the commonwealth and nationwide.'"

Jackson said 454 full-time Friendly's employees are now without adequate healthcare coverage.






The protest at 250 Andover St., scheduled for 2 p.m., will include the presentation of flowers or another "wellness" gift to the employees working inside the restaurant, said Jackson, adding, "We want them to know we're there for them," she said.

S. Priestly Blake, 91, co-founder of the restaurant chain and still a shareholder, told reporters he disapproved of the corporate decision but was powerless to stop it.

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The protest was originally scheduled at the Friendly's in Swampscott's Vinnin Square, but that restaurant recently closed.

Other large corporations, including Wal-Mart, McDonald's and Lowe's have been under fire for providing employees with inadequate healthcare coverage.

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