

Give 'Em Health

The Norfolk Debating Society at MCI-Norfolk in Massachusetts closed out its debate season by defeating Cornell University from Ithaca, New York. The two teams debated whether or not the United States government should provide health care to all its citizens.

Norfolk debater Steven Quinlan set the initial tone for the afternoon by presenting a fiery oratory outlining how the United States spends much more for health care than other industrialized nations, but fails to cover all its citizens. Mr. Quinlan showed how providing health care for all would improve overall health care outcomes and save tens of thousands of lives each year.

Cornell's Denny Li countered by defending the changes made to the US health care system by the Affordable Care Act, or Obama Care. Mr. Li said that the ACA had all the mechanisms needed to address the problems of the nation's health care system without creating a fully federalized system. Mr. Li's teammate, Sarah Stover, continued the attack during the team's first rebuttal in which she argued that Norfolk's ideas would cause doctors to flee from the system, which would lead to diminished care.

Gordon Haas of the Norfolk team attacked the idea that the ACA was a viable solution and then placed a human face on the crisis by sharing the story of a diabetes patient who died recently because she could not afford to buy insulin. Mr. Haas detailed point-by-point the flaws in Cornell's early argument.

Dylan Young, Cornell's next speaker, built on Ms. Stover's argument by telling the story of a young boy from England who had

died earlier this year because the UK's National Health Service lacked the capacity to treat him. Mr. Young then launched into an extensive attack of Norfolk's plan and talked about how much the plan would cost and how poor the results would be.

Norfolk's Ronald Leftwich, found Mr. Young's argument curious since Norfolk had yet to present the team's plan. Mr. Leftwich then proceeded to outline the team's innovative plan built around the concept of a health care voucher system. Norfolk's plan was far different than the traditional "Medicare for All" and "Single Payer" initiatives often discussed by politicians and pundits. The team said that they developed their position after reading a lengthy series of research papers created for the Brookings Institution.

Norfolk's James Keown followed his teammate and provided Norfolk's final rebuttal in which he answered the challenges made to the team's argument and plan. While acknowledging the often maligned UK health care system, he spoke of the many lesser known universal health care systems around the world that work far better than the US system. Mr. Keown also showed how even if Cornell's projected numbers for Norfolk's plan were correct that the cost would still be billions less over ten years than what the United States is currently paying under the ACA.

Cornell's final rebuttal speaker, Bertran Lee, tried to volley the argument back to their side by returning to the benefits of the ACA and how it was better poised to create an effective health care system that covers all citizens. Mr. Lee

used pop culture references to demonstrate how Norfolk's plan would hurt the poor and cost too much.

Cornell closed its argument with team member Brittany Garcia renewing the call to support the ACA and to reject Norfolk's plan that Ms. Garcia described as a regressive tax on the poor. Demetris Sally in Norfolk's close reminded the judges of the seven points Norfolk had presented and the more than forty pieces of evidence the team used to support their cause. Mr. Sally ended Norfolk's case with a strong declaration, "We, the People, can do better. We, the People, need to do better. We, the People, demand better."

Three outside judges comprised of the heads of the Boston College and Emerson College debate programs and Toastmasters International's local prison coordinator scored the results: 70.4 points to the Norfolk Debating Society and 65.3 points to Cornell University. The victory gave Norfolk its 146th win and marked the largest margin of victory for the team since its re-launch in 2014. Following the debate, Cornell University team coach Johanna Richter told the audience of more than 150 men from Norfolk, "We have debated teams from around the world -- including Harvard and Oxford -- you guys are as good, if not better, than any of them."

The Norfolk Debating Society was formed in 1933 by Cerise Jack. Ms. Jack was a frequent visitor to the prison at Norfolk, as well as other prisons and jails in Massachusetts. The Debating Society thrived at Norfolk over the next four decades collecting victories against Yale, Princeton, West Point, MIT, and Boston

College. The team beat Harvard University six times and was the first American prison debate team to win an international debate when Norfolk defeated Oxford in 1951. The Oxford debate drew more than 500 people including many outside visitors.

In the 1970s, as support for rehabilitation programs waned in US prisons, the Debating Society faded away. But the tradition of debate at MCI-Norfolk was not forgotten. In 2010, Daniel Throop was transferred to Norfolk from another prison where he had organized debates. He advocated for DOC officials to approve the re-launch of the Norfolk Debating Society. Working with James Keown, a fellow incarcerated man, Mr. Throop spent four years lobbying for the Norfolk Debating Society's comeback. DOC officials finally gave their approval in 2014, and the Norfolk Debating Society took the stage for its first college debate in forty years. Since then, the Norfolk Debating Society has competed against Boston College, MIT, Harvard University, and Cornell.

The team is currently working to expand its membership. This summer, the Norfolk Debating Society will run a debate training program to foster the next generation of prison debaters. The team is also preparing for its next debate season that will open in the fall.