

Starr Romano

Good morning. I am Starr Romano, an orthopedic and trauma RN at UPMC Altoona, formerly Altoona Regional Hospital.

This legislation, House Bills 1621 and 1622, hits particularly close to home for Blair County residents because our local hospital was taken over by UPMC this summer.

Almost 44,000 people in Blair County have Highmark insurance and don't know if UPMC will continue accepting their insurance. That's because even though UPMC says they will maintain Highmark members' access to Altoona Hospital, no formal agreement has been reached and UPMC has not answered important questions, like whether Blair County residents will maintain in-network access when referred to UPMC facilities in Pittsburgh.

Simply, UPMC should accept Highmark subscribers—and ensure in-network access—without any strings attached.

I have elderly patients with Security Blue, the Medicare Part B provider, who tell me they are worried whether they will be sent to the next nearest hospitals an hour away.

I have been a nurse since 1980. I've always wanted to help people by working in medicine. I bring not just medical knowledge to my work but also compassion and human connection. I don't like cookie-cutter medicine, and we are becoming that now.

I've had patients question whether they should take a certain test or undergo a certain procedure because they don't know if their insurance will cover it.

I used to say, "You're in the hospital, don't worry."

But now, that isn't true. Everyone is worried about having the "right" insurance before they go through with any crucial procedure or test.

As a health care provider, that is heartbreaking. The scariest part is patients don't have much choice at this point and are trapped.

UPMC dominates the Blair County market. Under the hospital "umbrella," they operate Allegheny Healthcare Staffing, a temp nurse staffing agency, Home Nursing Agency, a home nurse and hospice service, and Home Health Resource, a durable medical equipment supplier, among other businesses.

UPMC also owns Bedford Hospital, about 40 minutes from Altoona. If you are not happy with your UPMC physician, it is hard to find a different one because UPMC owns Blair Medical, Mainline Medical and some surgical practices.

This legislation needs to pass because people should have a choice in their healthcare providers. They shouldn't be restricted from going to their local hospital simply because the new owner doesn't like their insurance. And they shouldn't have to pay an exorbitant amount of money to continue seeing their long-time physicians. That isn't fair and it doesn't make sense.

These are not just patients, they are our neighbors. We are a community hospital.