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AARP, partners launch drive to send message to candidates

Divided We Fail members will follow campaign trail urging politicians to focus on health care, Social Security and retirees

By JULIE SWIDWA

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BENTON TOWNSHIP — The first order of business for Congress and the new U.S. president next January should be to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable, quality health care and financial security after a lifetime of work.

“We need people to scream from the rafters that these are the most critical domestic issues and we want no more excuses, blame or gridlock. Just do it,” said Steve Gools, state director of AARP, during a two-hour meeting Monday.

Rallying a small group gathered at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, Gools explained the movement being launched by Divided We Fail. The bipartisan organization was developed by AARP and three other partners to raise the voices of millions of Americans who are concerned about their financial futures.

The other partners are the National Business Roundtable, representing Fortune 500 companies; the National Federation of Independent Businesses, representing small businesses; and the Service Employees International Union, the fastest-growing labor union in the country.

AARP is the nation’s largest membership organization, with 39 million members nationwide and 1.6 million in Michigan.

“We’re trying to identify folks who will help us have a visible presence on the campaign trail so the candidates will get a clear message that these are the issues that whoever wants to be president must address,” Gools said. “It will be impossible for any candidate to set foot in Michigan or in any other state and not understand that these are the key issues.”

Members of Divided We Fail are recognizable at political events by their red T-shirts with a half donkey/half elephant logo.

“Out of this meeting will grow a campaign,” Gools told about 25 people who attended Monday’s town hall-style meeting, the third of 16 such meetings throughout Michigan. Divided We Fail is meeting with religious leaders in Benton Harbor today before moving on to another part of the state.

Rahim Abdullah, 4th Ward Benton Harbor city commissioner, said he will encourage the City Commission to adopt a resolution of support for Divided We Fail. The Berrien County Board of Commissioners, at the urging of the Berrien County Board of Health, adopted a resolution of support last week. Abdullah said that in his city there are too many people choosing between health care and buying food.

“I definitely want to be a part of this,” he told Gools.

Gools said, “It’s this kind of leadership at the community level that will make this work.”

Gools, 50, was himself moved to action when he suffered a stroke at age 30. He said he and his wife cashed out all their retirement savings to pay for his rehabilitation after his insurance company dropped him. Now, his life savings are gone.

“It’s easy for politicians to ignore statistics. But what they cannot ignore is human faces behind these issues,” Gools said.

People can log on to [www. dividedwefail.org](http://www.dividedwefail.org) to tell their own stories. Gools said the organization will choose the most compelling stories to tell along the campaign trail.

“AARP is financially healthy, and we’re going to throw everything behind this campaign including the kitchen sink,” he vowed. “One of our goals is to develop a list of 1 million people we can send information to regarding what the candidates are doing on these issues, so you can spread the word.”

At Monday’s meeting, one woman in the audience talked about the effects of breast cancer and how her insurance company has denied her certain prescriptions. She said she and her husband own a small business and are dipping into profits to help workers pay for their health insurance.

John and Marilyn Miser of Benton Harbor were among about a dozen people who expressed interest in traveling to campaign sites with Divided We Fail.

“I don’t have any health issues yet, but I know people who are broke because of a health issue,” John Miser said. “I know people who are planning to work until the day they die because of a health issue.”

For information about how to get involved with Divided We Fail, call 866-227-7448 or 313-318-0517. Contact Julie Swidwa at [jswidwa@ TheH-P.com](mailto:jswidwa@TheH-P.com).