

Georgeanne Koehler

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Testimony to the House Education and Workforce Committee on the Patient Protection
and Affordable Care Act

Today I stand in front of you to tell you the story of a man who fell through the cracks of our broken health care system, never to return to us again. That man's name is Billy, he is my beloved brother.

Billy was born on March 18, 1951. He was the son of Phillip and Dorothy Koehler and the baby brother of four little girls. He was baptized William Anthony but he was always Billy to me. He was a good kid and grew up to be a great man.

My sister Kitty describes him as a man who was loving and generous to his family, friends and those in need. That love and generosity came easy to him because of his loving relationship with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Billy was a true believer in the teaching of the Lord that we are our brothers and sisters keeper. Because of that belief Billy was a quiet hero to many.

Billy suffered his first cardiac arrest when he was 39. He was diagnosed with having Torsades de pointe, a sudden death type of arrhythmia. Although there is no cure for this arrhythmia, it is recommended that the patient have an implanted AICD defibrillator ready to fire at any time. He was discharged from the hospital with his life saving defibrillator. He had insurance through his job so caring for his heart and defibrillator wasn't a big deal.

In the Spring of 2003, Billy went to work to hear the news that the company would be closing. It closed a few days later. No more VCRs to repair, no more job, no more health insurance.

He sent out application after application hoping to find another job that offered a fair wage and health insurance. He went on interviews, but that job was no where to be found -- especially for a man who had to wear a medic alert bracelet.

Billy didn't want the government to give him anything, he wanted to buy a private health insurance plan. He called every health insurance company in Pittsburgh in hopes of buying a private plan, but the answer was always the same: "denied due to his pre-existing condition."

Billy found a job delivering pizza. The job paid minimum wage with no benefits, but nonetheless, he was thankful for the work.

On Dec. 14th, 2007, Billy collapsed at work. He was rushed to a local hospital and was admitted to a 23 hour monitored bed. His cardiologist came into the room and said: "Mr. Koehler, you are a very lucky man. Your defibrillator battery is so low, I'm surprised it fired this time. It needs replaced."

The doctor went on to say that the replacement would be done as an outpatient procedure and that Billy needed to make an appointment to be seen in three months. Billy said: "I have no insurance and I don't know if I'll have it by the time of the appointment. If I don't, what will happen?"

The doctor said: "If you don't have insurance, you will have to pay upfront and you will have to bring thousands of dollars with you."

Billy said: "I don't know what to do because I don't have thousands of dollars nor does my family. I don't know what to do."

The doctor moved from the foot of the bed to the side of the bed and asked: "Mr. Koehler, do you put oil in your car?" Billy didn't answer. The doctor said "Mr. Koehler, I asked you a question. Do you put oil in your car?"

Billy replied: "Of course I put oil in my car."

The doctor then said: "Do you buy the best oil money can buy so your car runs smoother and lasts longer because that is what you have to do for your heart."

Billy said: "You're talking about a can of oil that costs me \$8.50 compared to a defibrillator battery that costs \$10,000 and that doesn't include the surgery. I will never have that kind of money."

It was then the doctor pointed his finger at Billy and said: "You get your priorities straightened out and you will come up with that money."

The doctor left the room and discharged Billy from his service. Billy was discharged from the hospital on December 15, 2007 without a defibrillator that would be ready to fire at any time.

Billy was pro-life. He believed in the importance of life from conception until natural death. Billy had a very even temperament and I only saw him angry three times in his life. The first was when he heard Terry Schiavo's tube feeding was going to be discontinued, the second was when his cardiologist gave him the humiliating lecture where he compared putting oil in his car to taking care of his heart, and the third was on that day of his discharge -- that day when he walked out of the hospital with a death sentence handed down by our broken health care system and realized that in our country unless you have money, you can't have your health.

On March 6th, 2009, Billy went to church to spend his hour at adoration. He knelt on the floor of the altar, thanking and praising God for his blessings, and for the job he grew to love. He asked God to bless his family, friends and those in need. He asked his Almighty Healer to heal his heart, if it be Thy will.

Billy left work to go home at 5:00pm on March 7, 2009. He drove two blocks, came to a stop sign, put his car in park, and slumped into his steering wheel. Compassionate strangers came to his aid. They got him out of his car and began CPR, while others stood in silence offering their prayers. A young man saw what was happening and began running down the hill. As he ran, he took off his hooded sweatshirt and began to fold it and when he got to Billy, he knelt down and placed that sweatshirt under his head... a gesture of comfort for a man in need. That day, these compassionate strangers didn't care if Billy had a health insurance card in his pocket. All that mattered to them was doing what they could to give Billy back another day of life. Something his cardiologist could have done, should have done, and took an oath to do. So why didn't he? The answer is found in one word and that word is written throughout his medical chart. That word is "uninsured."

Today I am not here to ask you to feel mine and my family's pain, I would never want to take you there. I am going to ask you, though, when you have a minute, maybe watching the sun go down or standing on the porch sipping a cup of decaf, to close your eyes and look inside yourself. Not to your heart but into your soul because that is where you will find your moral compass, and ask yourself this question -- if Billy was alive today, would his life matter to you? Would you be one of those compassionate strangers trying your hardest to give Billy back another day of life? If when you open your eyes the answer is yes, then you will not be able to repeal the Affordable Care Act... an act that would have saved Billy's life, and an act that is the hope of life for millions of Americans who -- without it, are only left with the thought of death.