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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Post Register

Idaho Falls, Idaho

Monday, March 19, 2018

Bryan Clark

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Idaho Health Care Plan revived

BOISE - The Idaho Health Care Plan will get an up-or-down vote in the House. It's a last breath of hope this session for Idahoans in the Medicaid gap, and it sets up Republicans for a tough vote ahead of coming elections.

The Idaho Health Care Plan had earlier passed out of the House Health and Welfare Committee, but after a series of closed-door caucus meetings the bill was sent back to committee. That's almost always a sure sign that it's dead for the year.

But last week disability advocates, doctors, patients and medical students flooded the Capitol to demand an up-or-down vote on the plan, also called the "dual-waiver" proposal. The bill would encourage patients with very high cost medical conditions to transfer to Medicaid, reducing premiums in the individual market, and it would extend subsidies to those in the Medicaid gap that would allow them to purchase private plans at low cost. Those in the gap would get the same coverage currently available for green card holders of the same income level, who in Idaho currently get more assistance than citizens.

Even if the bill clears the House and Senate, and gains Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's signature, it would require federal approval to go into effect.

Nichole Stull, a mother of four who with her husband spent two-and-a-half years in the Medicaid gap, captured the stage last week when she broke down in tears describing her family's experiences in the gap. When she suspected her husband had a bone fracture, they simply waited for it to heal. When she found she had a gene that puts her at greatly heightened risk of cancer, she and her husband, independent contractors, had to project that they would make enough income to get assistance paying for insurance. But if their income falls short, they will have to refund the subsidies.

Stull said she thought lawmakers were being protected from an on-the-record vote for which they would have to answer in upcoming elections. She described such protection as "cowardly," saying lawmakers should have to answer to their constituents for their stance on the issue.

That message resonated with some on the committee.

Rep. Christy Perry, R-Nampa, led an unexpected move to send the bill back to the floor Monday morning. While the issue wasn't on the committee's agenda, Perry said after years of inaction on the gap, she wanted to give the bill a vote.

"I've had people come in here in tears because they've lost family members," Perry said. "They've lost people because they can't get health insurance. I can't, for the life of me, understand why we won't get someone

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covered cheaply and get them insulin, but we end up having to pay to get their foot amputated. It just makes no sense to me. I think we owe (them) the vote."

Perry noted that claims on county indigent funds and the state CAT Fund spiked this year as the number of uninsured grew slightly. Those funds cover hospitals' costs when they offer emergency room care to patients who can't afford to pay the bills.

Perry met vehement opposition from Republicans on the committee whose ideology is on the far right of the GOP caucus.

Rep. Bryan Zollinger, R-Idaho Falls, repeatedly accused Perry, who is running for Congress, of playing politics. He said the move would harm members who oppose the bill, by "hanging them out to dry."

Zollinger is an attorney whose primary practice is in the area of medical debt collection.

Rep. Karey Hanks, R-St. Anthony, said members of the gap should get jobs, though reviews by the Department of Health and Welfare have found the majority of those in the Medicaid gap work but don't make enough to afford coverage.

"People need to get back to work," she said.

But even on the right there were defections. Rep. Eric Redman, R-Athol, has long expressed support for a solution to the Medicaid gap and said the Idaho Health Care Plan is a good policy.

"The reason it was pulled out I feel was strictly campaign fodder," Redman said. "I think we need to vote on it, either for or against it."

In an unusual display, Zollinger expressed strong support for the chairman and speaker's system, which allows bills to be killed without votes. Members on the right have frequently criticized that system when chairmen blocked bills they favor, such as a bill to legalize CBD oil and a more expansive version of the stand your ground law and castle doctrine. Zollinger suggested it would disrespect Chairman Fred Wood, R-Burley, to send the bill back to the floor after he had pulled it back to committee.

Wood was out of the room for the first part of the meeting, but he returned to vote on the bill, casting the deciding vote to send it back to the House floor. The motion passed 7-5.

Zollinger lashed out on Facebook following the vote, describing those on the committee who supported the bill as "self-proclaimed Republicans," and invoking a Biblical passage about false prophets: "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." And he accused Wood of violating the separation of powers by speaking with Otter - one of the bill's lead sponsors - about the revived legislation.

He linked to a story by the Spokesman-Review, reporting an overheard conversation between Wood and Otter, in which Wood told the governor: "You'd better get the votes. You said you had 'em."

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The vote will put some Republicans heading into elections in a tough spot. While some libertarian-leaning lobbies such as the Idaho Freedom Foundation oppose the Idaho Health Care Plan, few policies are more popular with Republican voters, or with Idaho voters more broadly.

In a large Boise State poll earlier this year, two-thirds of Idahoans rated health care among the most important areas of policy for the Legislature to address, second only to education. Support for covering the Medicaid gap population was 76 percent among Idahoans, including 70 percent of Idaho Republicans.

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