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The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Wednesday April 5, 2017
Wire Report (McClatchy)
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Rekindled health bill proposes new cuts

WASHINGTON — With hopes of passing new legislation to replace the Affordable Care Act before a congressional recess begins late this week, the Trump administration and Republicans in the House of Representatives reportedly are eyeing new concessions that would erode consumer protections in the health care law and make coverage less accessible for those with medical problems.

It was in large part opposition from the conservative House Freedom Caucus, led by Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., that forced House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., to cancel a March 24 vote on the GOP health bill. Conservatives opposed the original bill because they claimed it was too much like Obamacare, that its tax credits created a new entitlement program for the wealthy and didn't eliminate enough Obama-care insurance regulations.

In an effort to secure caucus support this time around, Ryan and the Trump administration are discussing giving states the option to forgo an Affordable Care Act rule that requires individual insurers to cover 10 "essential health benefits," including outpatient care, like doctor visits; emergency room services; hospitalization; prescription drugs; and maternity and newborn care.

The new Republican proposal, which is still being developed, also would allow states to scrap the Affordable Care Act's "community rating" provision, which forbids insurers from charging sick plan members more than healthy ones.

The Freedom Caucus had sought both concessions during negotiations on the earlier House legislation but were rebuffed by moderates concerned about the impact on constituents.

After the Freedom Caucus met with Vice President Mike Pence and White House officials on Monday night to discuss the proposals, Meadows said the legislative text of the new plan could come from the White House sometime on Tuesday.

He said the Freedom Caucus, while encouraged and "intrigued" by the new proposals, "would certainly need a whole lot more information before we can take any action either in support or in opposition."

On Tuesday, Ryan said, "productive talks" with caucus members could help the legislation reach the 216 votes needed for House passage. He credited Pence with restarting the negotiations but said he didn't want to impose an "artificial deadline."

by Tony Pugh, Lesley Clark and William Douglas for McClatchy Washington Bureau

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