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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Friday May 5, 2017
Wire Report
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House passes bill to revise Obamacare

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday narrowly approved legislation to repeal and replace major parts of the Affordable Care Act, as Republicans recovered from their earlier failures and moved a step closer to delivering on their promise to reshape U.S. health care without mandated insurance coverage.

The vote, 217-213, held on President Donald Trump's 105th day in office, is a significant step on what could be a long legislative road. Twenty Republicans bolted from their leadership to vote no. But the win keeps alive the party's dream of unwinding President Barack Obama's signature domestic achievement.

The House measure faces profound uncertainty in the Senate, where a handful of Republican senators immediately rejected it, signaling that they would start work on a new version of the bill virtually from scratch.

"To the extent that the House solves problems, we might borrow ideas," said Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, chairman of the Senate health committee. "We can go to conference with the House, or they can pass our bill."

Even before the vote, some Republican senators had expressed deep reservations about one of the most important provisions of the House bill, which would roll back the expansion of Medicaid under the health law.

But a softening of the House bill, which could help it get through the Senate, would present new problems. Any Senate legislation would again have to clear the House and its conservative majority.

Just before the House vote, the Senate on Thursday gave final approval to a \$1.1 trillion spending bill that will finance the government through September, and unlike the health care legislation, the spending bill had broad bipartisan support.

After weeks of negotiations and false starts, Trump and House Republicans were not about to dwell on the tough road ahead. Passage of the health care bill completed a remarkable act of political resuscitation, six weeks after House leaders failed to muster the votes to pass an earlier version of the measure, a blow to Trump and Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin.

"Yes, premiums will be coming down; yes, deductibles will be coming down, but very importantly, it's a great plan," Trump boasted on Thursday at the kind of White House Rose Garden victory ceremony typically reserved for legislation that is being signed into law, not for a controversial bill that passed just one chamber.

"We want to brag about the plan," Trump said, after asking those assembled how he was doing in his debut as a politician. "Hey, I'm president!"

Trump quickly turned his attention to pressuring the Senate to act, calling the majority leader, Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., to talk about the way forward for the health plan.

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Democrats, who voted unanimously against the bill, vowed to make Republicans pay a political price for pushing such unpopular legislation. As Republicans reached the threshold for passage, Democrats serenaded them with, “Na na na na, na na na na, hey hey hey, goodbye!”

“I have never seen political suicide in my life like I’m seeing today,” Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, D-N.Y., said on the House floor ahead of the vote.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader, warned moderate Republicans who supported the measure: “You have every provision of this bill tattooed on your forehead. You will glow in the dark on this one.”

The House bill would eliminate tax penalties for people who go without health insurance. It would roll back state-by-state expansions of Medicaid, which covered millions of low-income Americans. And in place of government-subsidized insurance policies offered exclusively on the Affordable Care Act’s marketplaces, the bill would offer tax credits of \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year, depending on age.

A family could receive up to \$14,000 a year in credits. The credits would be reduced for individuals making over \$75,000 a year and families making over \$150,000.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the first version of the bill would trim the federal budget deficit considerably but would also leave 24 million more Americans without health insurance after a decade. Average insurance premiums would be 15 percent to 20 percent higher in 2018 and 2019, but after that, they would be lower than projected under current law.

Alexander, chairman of the Senate health committee, said Thursday that Republicans have been quietly working for several months on their own bill and would take the House measure under consideration for ideas and components.

Senate Republicans will face some of the same dynamics that stymied the House for weeks. Moderate senators will demand significant concessions, which in turn could alienate a trio of hard-liners: Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas, Rand Paul of Kentucky and Mike Lee of Utah.

Republican senators are certain to face pressure from governors worried about constituents on Medicaid losing their coverage. Republican leaders changed the House bill to woo hard-line conservatives, allowing state governments to roll back required coverage for essential services like maternity and emergency care. States could also seek waivers that would let insurers charge higher premiums for some people with preexisting medical conditions.

“We cannot pull the rug out from under states like Nevada that expanded Medicaid, and we need assurances that people with pre-existing conditions will be protected,” said Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., who is up for re-election next year.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., said he wanted to ensure that the final repeal bill “fulfills President Trump’s promises to lower premiums, maintain coverage and protect those with pre-existing conditions.”

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Democrats are confident that some provisions of the House bill will be found to violate special budget rules that Republicans must follow in order to skirt a Senate filibuster.

by Thomas Kaplan and Robert Pear for The New York Times

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