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by Alan Fram (AP)
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Trump calls House health care bill 'mean'

President criticizes plan he praised in meeting with top GOP senators

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump told Republican senators Tuesday that the House-passed health care bill he helped revive is "mean" and urged them to craft a version that is "more generous," congressional sources said.

Trump's remarks were a surprising slap at a Republican-written House measure that was shepherded by Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and whose passage the president lobbied for and praised. At a Rose Garden ceremony minutes after the bill's narrow House passage on May 4, Trump called it "a great plan."

The president's criticism, at a White House lunch with 15 GOP senators, also came as Senate Republican leaders' attempts to write their own health care package have been slowed by disagreements between their party's conservatives and moderates.

Trump's characterizations seemed to undercut attempts by Senate leaders to assuage conservatives who want restrictions in their chamber's bill, such as cutting the Medicaid health care program for the poor and limiting the services insurers must cover. Moderate GOP senators have been pushing to ease those restrictions.

Facing expected unanimous Democratic opposition, Republicans will be unable to pass a Senate bill if just three of the 52 GOP senators vote "no." Alienating any of them could make approving the measure trickier for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who's been hoping for a vote before Congress' July 4 recess.

Trump's comments were described by two GOP congressional sources who received accounts of Tuesday's White House lunch. They spoke on condition of anonymity to reveal a closed-door conversation.

Their descriptions of Trump's words differed slightly.

One source said Trump called the House bill "mean, mean, mean" and said, "We need to be more generous, more kind." The other source said Trump used a vulgarity to describe the House bill and told the senators, "We need to be more generous."

Two other congressional GOP officials confirmed that the general descriptions of Trump's words were accurate.

The sources said the president did not specify what aspects of the bill he was characterizing.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders declined to comment, telling reporters aboard Air Force One Tuesday evening, "We don't comment on rumors or private conversations."

The remarks provided ammunition to Democrats who have unanimously opposed the Republican effort to dismantle President Barack Obama's health care overhaul.

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In an embarrassing retreat, Ryan had to abruptly cancel a March vote on the House measure after a revolt by Republican conservatives and moderates that would have ensured its defeat.

The measure's final version reflected a compromise by conservative leader Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., and centrist Rep. Tom MacArthur, R-N.J. They agreed to language letting states drop requirements under Obama's health care law protecting people with pre-existing medical conditions from higher premiums and requiring insurers to cover specific services like maternity care.

At the White House ceremony celebrating House passage, Trump and Ryan praised the legislation as the fulfillment of campaign promises Trump and GOP congressional candidates had long made to repeal Obama's 2010 statute.

"Many of you have been waiting seven years to cast this vote," Ryan said to the scores of Republican House members present. "Many of you are here because you pledged to cast this vote."

Asked to comment on Trump's remarks about the House measure, Ryan spokeswoman AshLee Strong said, "Congressional Republicans, with President Trump's support, are working to repeal and replace this terrible Obamacare law that is harming Americans."

Meadows, who is chairman of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, said, "I have no knowledge of the president characterizing the health care bill in any other way than to suggest that we need to lower premiums and" protect people with pre-existing conditions.

MacArthur's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Trump's description of the bill MacArthur helped resuscitate. Just last weekend, Trump used his golf club in Bedminster, N.J., to hold a fundraising event for MacArthur that netted $800,000.

Trump had not publicly criticized the House bill previously. But in a May 28 tweet that raised questions about his intent, he said: "I suggest that we add more dollars to Healthcare and make it the best anywhere. ObamaCare is dead — the Republicans will do much better!"

After the meeting with senators, Trump flew to Wisconsin, where, for the second week in a row, he highlighted the stories of people whose health care premiums have increased — people the White House has dubbed "Obamacare victims."

After meeting with two such couples after landing in Milwaukee, Trump pointed to "millions of American families" he said "continue to suffer from Obamacare while Congressional Democrats obstruct our efforts to rescue them."

Trump did not discuss the House GOP health care plan in any detail, but said the Senate is getting ready to do something.

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