



Running out of time, Senate's healthcare debate gets creative

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Washington, Dec. 7 – Stung by Republican charges that their healthcare legislation would rob seniors by cutting back on the popular federal Medicare program, on Monday more Senate Democrats piled aboard a proposal floated Sunday to expand both Medicare and Medicaid coverage. The compromise proposal would include a watered-down public option run by the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM) which already runs the popular Federal Employees Health Benefits Program which covers members of Congress.

This creative compromise is being hammered out in ongoing negotiations among Democrats in a desperate effort to find the 60 votes needed to overcome a certain Republican filibuster – and find these 60 votes in time for a final Senate vote before Christmas. The hope is that all 58 Senate Democrats plus the two independents, Sens. Joe Lieberman (CT) and Bernie Sanders (VT), could support the compromise because it could:

- defuse moderate Democrats' concern that the bill would create a new government bureaucracy to run the program,
- while providing the "public option" which liberal Democrats insist on,
- creating a more competitive marketplace which liberal Democrats and the White House insist is essential for dramatically cutting health insurance costs,
- extending Medicare by allowing people to buy into the program starting at age 55 until they turn 65, and
- extending Medicaid to cover people with incomes up to 150 percent above the poverty line rather than 133 percent.

To seal the deal, there's hope that this carefully balanced compromise could attract at least one Republican – Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME) – because Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE) has promised to join Republicans in filibustering the health reform bill unless it includes additional language to reinforce the existing ban on federal dollars being used for abortion coverage. On Monday, Nelson introduced his abortion amendment backed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and co-sponsored by Democratic Sen. Robert Casey (PA) and Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch (UT), Sam Brownback (KS), John Thune (SD), Tom Coburn (OK), Mike Johanns (NE), David Vitter (LA) and John Barrasso (WY). Since the amendment is considered very unlikely to get 60 votes, the expectation is that Nelson will carry out his threat to join the GOP filibuster.

Defeat of Nelson's abortion amendment would fit the pattern in healthcare amendment votes which have demonstrated that reaching the magic 60 votes is an extremely high hurdle.

Nelson's Nebraska colleague, Sen. Mike Johanns (R-NE) offered an amendment to provide more money for home health care services. When his amendment came in seven votes short, in a 53-41 count, Johanns commented that "The current bill cuts billions of dollars from home health care programs, many that serve our most vulnerable Americans. My amendment would have protected the millions of Americans who depend on home health care services, particularly in rural areas, but unfortunately not enough of my colleagues stood up for these protections."

In a sign of how partisan the healthcare debate has been, Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT) explained the vote against the Johanns amendment this way: "It's simple - our bill cracks down on waste, fraud, and abuse in Medicare. The savings we achieve are going to be used to improve the quality of Medicare and extend the life of this vital program. This amendment by Senator Johanns is nothing more than the latest maneuver by Senate Republicans to scare seniors and kill reform. It is becoming more and more clear that the Republicans would rather resort to scare tactics than work to bring about true health care reform."

Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) saw her amendment to cap tax-deductible salaries for health insurance executives at \$400,000, rather than the current limit of \$1 million, come up four votes short in a 56-42 vote Sunday. Lincoln commented that: "The choice today was simple – either support America's seniors by putting revenues right into the Medicare Trust Fund, or allow health insurance companies to retain their generous tax shelter for the multimillion-dollar compensation packages of their executives. Health insurance reform promises to bring millions of new customers to insurance companies and dramatically improve their bottom line. I believe it is fair to ask these companies to give up a long-standing taxpayer subsidy that allows them to write off up to \$1 million in executive compensation."

When common-sense amendments to improve the health insurance system can't get 60 votes, one staffer explained in frustration, there's no alternative to "getting very creative" in the horse trading needed to "herd these cats."

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