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Senate Begins Debating and Voting on Amendments to Health Reform Bill

On November 30, the Senate began considering amendments to the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,” the health reform bill that was unveiled by Senate leaders two week ago.

Since returning from the Thanksgiving recess, the Senate has voted on eight amendments or motions on issues relating to coverage of preventive services, Medicare funding cuts, and a newly proposed program for long-term care insurance. As of this writing, an amendment by Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) and a motion by Sen. Mike Johanns (R-NE) currently are pending in the Senate. The Lincoln amendment would set a \$400,000 limit on the tax deductibility of executive salaries for private health insurance companies. The Johanns motion seeks to block the proposed payment cuts for Medicare home health agencies.

Over the next several days, the next round of amendments is expected to focus – to name just a few issues – on eliminating the proposed taxes, taking additional steps on cost containment, closing the Medicare Part D coverage gap and expanding drug rebates for dual eligible beneficiaries, repealing the federal antitrust exemption for health insurance issuers and medical malpractice issuers, authorizing the importation of prescription drugs, and restricting coverage of abortion services.

The Senate is scheduled to be in session this weekend, both Saturday and Sunday, to continue debate on the bill. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) has emphasized that senators should be prepared for many late evening sessions and weekend sessions as the Senate works toward the goal of passing a health reform bill by the end of the year.

Key votes in the Senate this week include the following:

- By a vote of 61 to 39, the Senate approved an amendment by Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) that would require first dollar coverage, without any cost sharing, for certain preventive services.
- By a vote of 51 to 47, the Senate failed to approve an amendment by Sen. John Thune (R-SD) that would have removed the CLASS Act provisions from the pending bill. The CLASS Act would establish a national voluntary



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- long-term care insurance program, funded by premiums, which would provide cash benefits to meet the needs of individuals who have functional limitations. Although 51 senators voted “yes,” this amendment failed because it was subject to a 60-vote threshold for approval. Twelve Democrats crossed party lines to vote for this amendment.
- By a vote of 58 to 42, the Senate defeated a motion by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) that would have sent the pending bill back to the Senate Finance Committee with instructions to remove the proposed cuts in Medicare funding.

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