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Congress Focused on Passing Health Reform Before Easter Recess

AHIP, Washington Update, 3/5/2010

Throughout the past week, members of Congress have been engaged in intense discussions, focusing on both policy details and procedural issues, following President Obama's call on Wednesday for final votes on health reform legislation within the next few weeks.

Congressional leaders have indicated in recent days that they are aiming to complete action on health reform before the Easter recess, which is scheduled to begin on March 27. As of this writing, however, there is considerable uncertainty about the content of the final health reform bill and the timeline for Senate and House action. It is widely expected that the House will vote first on the Senate-passed health reform bill (H.R. 3590) and then, as part of a "sidecar" strategy, vote soon thereafter on a reconciliation package making changes to the Senate bill.

President Obama held separate meetings yesterday with liberal Democrats and moderate Democrats to discuss the need for health reform legislation. Participants in these meetings said afterwards that the President told progressives he will work with them in the future to build support for a government-run plan in separate legislation. He also pledged to work with the centrists in advancing future changes. As Congress prepares for the upcoming votes, the President will be actively engaged in reaching out to lawmakers and participating in public events to build support for the passage of health reform.

Many rank-and-file members are unlikely to make a firm commitment to vote "yes" until they have seen final legislative language and a cost estimate. There also is some wariness among House Democrats about approving the Senate-passed health reform bill without first receiving strong assurances that the Senate will approve the reconciliation package containing the changes that currently are being finalized.



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President Obama Calls for Final Congressional Action on Health Reform

President Obama addressed health reform issues this week, urging Congress to move quickly to finalize legislation and addressing a letter to congressional leaders about issues discussed at the February 25 bipartisan summit.

On March 3, the President delivered a statement in which he said that he has asked Senate and House leaders to finish work on health reform and schedule final votes in the next few weeks. The President said that the issues have been debated thoroughly and that now is the time to make a decision. Although he did not specifically mention the budget reconciliation process, the President said that the American people deserve an “up or down” vote on health reform in the same way that welfare reform and tax cuts were approved by Congress in the past under reconciliation rules.

The President said that health reform would change three things: (1) end the “worst practices” of health insurance companies; (2) give individuals and small businesses the same kind of choices members of Congress have; and (3) bring down health care costs for families, businesses, and the government.

On March 2, the President addressed a letter to congressional leaders, discussing areas where Democrats and Republicans agree on health reform and areas where they disagree. While reflecting on the dialogue at the February 25 bipartisan health reform summit, the President noted that there was agreement on the following issues: reforming insurance markets; allowing individuals and small businesses to join together to increase their purchasing power; addressing waste, fraud and abuse; and controlling health care costs. The President also suggested, however, that there was “a fundamental disagreement about what role the oversight of the health insurance industry should play in reform.”

In the following four areas, the President said he is open to exploring policy priorities identified by Republicans at the bipartisan summit: (1) conducting undercover investigations of health care providers that receive reimbursement from federal programs; (2) appropriating funds for state-based demonstration programs to test alternative approaches, including health courts, to resolving medical malpractice suits; (3) linking Medicaid eligibility expansions to higher Medicaid



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reimbursement for physicians; and (4) clarifying that HSAs may be offered through the proposed health insurance exchanges.

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