

This Week in Health Reform: December 3, 2009

On November 21, Senate lawmakers [voted](#) along party lines to begin full debate over Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's (D-NV) proposed health care reform legislation, following the Thanksgiving recess. Those negotiations began this week in the Senate.

WellPoint believes the Senate legislation will have a significant, negative impact on the cost and nature of coverage for our customers. We believe it will cause more problems for [employers](#), [employees](#), and [customers](#).

We continue to encourage you, and other like-minded people, to engage your Senators during this debate by visiting the [Health Action Network](#).

### **House and Senate Negotiations:**

***Senate Debates Health Care Reform Bill:*** Monday marked the beginning of the Senate's debate over health care reform. [Discussions](#) highlighted many of the issues that remain contentious, including [cost-containment](#), the [public option](#), illegal immigrants, Medicare cuts, and abortion funding. In the coming weeks, each side will be offering dozens of amendments that will be debated and voted on. On Wednesday, lawmakers agreed to [vote](#) on amendments addressing two of this week's [main issues](#), centering on women and seniors:

- [One proposed amendment](#), co-sponsored by Sens. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME), would increase insurance benefits for women, mandating that policies include an annual health screening. While [the amendment](#) does not specifically lay out what preventive services will be covered, the measure gives the Health and Human Services Secretary the authority to make these determinations. Debate on the amendment focused on the controversial recommendations last month that women undergo fewer mammograms and Pap smears to test for cervical cancer. The Congressional Budget Office said the amendment would cost \$940 million over a decade. This amendment passed by a vote of 61-39.
- Another proposed amendment was filed by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and would remove from the bill \$400 million in [Medicare cuts](#) to home health providers, hospitals, and private providers of Medicare Advantage plans. This motion failed by a vote of 58 to 42.

***AARP Backs Medicare Cuts:*** As Senate lawmakers prepare to vote on controversial Medicare funding amendments to the reform legislation, [AARP](#) said in a letter on Wednesday that the organization supports Medicare cuts.

***Medical Groups Oppose Senate Bill:*** ~~Medical Groups Oppose Senate Bill~~ And 18 other medical societies representing surgeon specialists indicated Wednesday that they ~~could~~ could not support the proposed Senate bill given that it inadequately addresses Medicare's ~~and~~ doctor payment system. In addition, the California Medical Association joined a number of ~~other~~ other [state medical associations](#), including Florida, Georgia, and Texas, ~~in~~ in opposition to the bill being discussed in the Senate. The California Medical

Association cites increases in costs of services and restrictions in access to care for elderly and low-income people as reason for the opposition.

***CBO: Premiums Could Rise for Individuals:*** According to a [new analysis](#) from the Congressional Budget Office ([CBO](#)) released Monday, the Senate's health care reform bill may increase premiums for individuals purchasing insurance, unless they qualify for government subsidies. [The report](#) also indicates that employees from large companies would see premiums decrease, while those from small firms would see premiums remain largely unchanged. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page [on Tuesday](#) made the case that according to the CBO, employer-sponsored insurance costs would remain roughly in line with the status quo, a result tantamount to failure considering the overall cost-cutting goals of reform.

***Abortion Continues to Take Center Stage:*** [Abortion-rights](#) groups held a [lobby day](#) on Wednesday as part of a national "week of action" to fight language in the House health care bill that would impose greater restrictions on access to the procedure. The Senate's reform bill currently does not include the same level of restrictions. However, the language from the House bill is expected to come up during the debate.

#### **Other Activities:**

***Pfizer CEO Backs Reform:*** [Pfizer, Inc.](#) CEO Jeffery Kindler said Tuesday that he supports Congress' efforts to reform the health care system. However, he is specifically opposed to anything that could lead to price controls, such as giving the government the ability to directly negotiate with drug makers for products under the Medicare Part D drug benefit program. Mr. Kindler also stated that the \$80 billion that the pharmaceutical industry has agreed to contribute to help pay for the health care system overhaul exceeds any benefit that the industry would receive from additional patients due to extended coverage.

#### **Public Opinion:**

***Americans Lean Against Health Care Reform:*** The latest [USA Today/Gallup Poll](#) released Monday shows that Americans currently skew against passing health care reform legislation. Forty-nine percent of Americans say they would advise their member of Congress to vote against the bill, while 44 percent say they would support it. A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [poll](#) conducted just before Thanksgiving indicates that most Americans do not expect health care reform to affect their lives directly. However, for those who do expect a change, a larger number believe that these will be more negative affects than positive ones. Interestingly, however, another poll released Monday by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center for Health Policy (UNM-RWJF Center), Latino Decisions and impreMedia shows widespread consensus among the [Latino/Hispanic electorate](#) about the importance of health care reform, indicating significant support for expansion of coverage.

*Americans Support Malpractice Reform:* An [Associated Press poll](#) released just before Thanksgiving shows that 54 percent of Americans favor making it harder to sue doctors and hospitals for medical errors, while 32 percent are opposed to the idea.

**Looking Ahead:**

Negotiations on proposed amendments to Sen. Reid's reform bill will continue in the coming weeks. Sen. Reid hopes to have a health care reform bill passed [by Christmas](#) but has warned Senators to plan to work weekends to get this done.