

This Week in Health Care Reform: Feb. 5, 2010

Despite his proclaimed focus on other issues, such as the economy and jobs, President Obama injected new energy into the health care reform debate this week.

On Monday, President Obama held a [Q&A session](#) via [YouTube](#) in which he responded to questions submitted during his State of the Union address. He commented that “it is my greatest hope” to have health care reform legislation “not just a year from now, but soon.” He also responded to criticisms regarding the lack of transparency around the reform negotiations. In a New Hampshire town-hall-style meeting on Tuesday, [President Obama](#) rejected the notion that health care reform was dead, saying “we’ve got to punch it through.” Further, on [Wednesday](#), he met with Senate Democrats reiterating his commitment to reform and encouraging lawmakers to press forward. He also suggested that Republicans play at least some role in negotiating a final bill.

As the health care reform debate continues to take shape this year we encourage you and others to engage members of Congress by visiting the [Health Action Network](#).

Health Care Reform Negotiations:

Democrats Look for Path Forward: Members of the news media speculate that recent statements from Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) are the first concrete signs that Democrats have started working to revive comprehensive health care reform legislation. Rep. Rangel indicated that lawmakers have begun writing a [compromise bill](#) based on the legislation passed by the Senate last December. The bill will incorporate changes agreed to last month by White House negotiators and members of the House and Senate. However, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) did not commit to a timeline for reform, but hopes that Democrats can agree to a path forward by next week. So far, he has been unable to identify compromise language that will win the needed 51 Senate votes.

At the same time, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) indicated that the House would vote on a [small piece](#) of the overall health care reform package next week. The proposed bill would overturn the insurance industry’s exemption from federal antitrust laws. The Senate version of health care reform did not include this measure because Sen. Reid could not secure the 60 votes needed to include it; however, Sen. Reid indicated the Senate would reconsider the measure.

Additional Activities:

President Obama’s Budget Assumes Health Care Reform: On Monday, White House officials released a proposed \$3.8 trillion 2011 budget, which includes several measures aimed at improving health care. Further, the budget assumes that some form of health care reform legislation will pass Congress. It [includes](#) a “reserve fund for health care reform” totaling \$634 billion as a “down payment” for the legislation and also [assumes](#) that the reform effort will generate [\\$150 billion](#) in savings over 10 years.

The budget allows for health care [measures](#) including:

- Hiring more fraud detectives to root out waste in Medicare and Medicaid;
- Providing \$25.5 billion to help state Medicaid programs swelling with enrollment due to unemployment;
- Eliminating Congressional earmarks for building hospitals and other facilities, including \$10 million for Alaska and \$35 million for Mississippi; and
- Initiating or increasing funds for the following research projects:
 - quality improvements for seniors with chronic conditions;
 - effective medical treatments for the costliest conditions;
 - expeditious ways to adopt electronic medical records; and
 - Medical fields, such as genetic medicine, that may provide breakthrough treatments.

States Begin Initiatives to Expand Coverage: With the fate of national health care reform in question, [state legislators](#) are pushing their own bills to expand coverage. Last Thursday, [California's State Senate](#) passed a measure to create a government-run health care system, ignoring a veto threat from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The measure is now with the State Assembly. Missouri legislators have introduced a similar bill to create a government-run plan; whereas lawmakers in other states, including Virginia and New Jersey, are working to tweak existing state programs to expand coverage. Their tight state budgets may hinder these efforts.

Virginia Senate Says No to Individual Mandates: On Monday, Virginia's Democratic-controlled State Senate [passed measures](#) that would make it illegal to enforce an individual mandate. This decision comes in direct conflict with the House and the Senate health care reform bills, both of which require all individuals to purchase health insurance.

Public Opinion:

Majority of Americans Doubt Passage of Health Care Reform, but Growing Optimism: A [survey](#) released by the Pew Research Center on Wednesday shows growing optimism around the passage of health care reform. While the poll indicates that the majority of Americans (60 percent) say they do not believe health care reform legislation will pass this year, this figure is down from 67 percent who said that such legislation would not pass just after a special Senate election was held last month in Massachusetts.

Poll Indicates Damage Done On Health Care Reform: A [poll](#) released Tuesday by Public Policy Polling shows that Republicans currently have the advantage over Democrats in the ballot races for Congress, regardless of the final outcome of health care reform. In general, the poll shows that 43 percent of voters surveyed would vote for a Republican, whereas 40 percent would vote for a Democrat. When asked about the implications of the health care overhaul:

- 45 percent would likely vote Republican and 40 percent would likely vote Democrat if health care reform passes.

- 43 percent would likely vote Republican and 38 percent would likely vote Democrat if health care reform does not pass.

The poll also shows that 36 percent of respondents say they support the President's health care reform effort, while 51 percent opposed it.

Looking Ahead:

Currently there is no timeline for the development of a comprehensive health care reform package. However, Sen. Pelosi is moving forward with smaller pieces of the bill, starting with the repeal of the antitrust exemption for insurance companies next week.