

House Democrats to open hearings on health bill

June 23 2009, By ERICA WERNER , Associated Press Writer



FILE - In this Jan. 8, 2009 file photo, then-Health and Human Services Secretary-designate Tom Daschle, right, smiles as he prepares to testify on Capitol Hill in Washington, accompanied by former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole. Daschle, who once was Obama's choice for shepherding the nation's health care overhaul through Congress, said the chance of legislation passing is no better than 50-50. Those are fairly good odds, he said, for such complicated proposals that stir such deep passions. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

(AP) -- House Democrats are pushing forward with a partisan health care bill even as a key Senate Democrat labors to achieve an elusive bipartisan compromise on President Barack Obama's top legislative priority.

The action on both sides of the Capitol comes with lawmakers mindful of next week's July 4 congressional recess. Most will return home to face constituents with plenty of questions about their plans to overhaul the nation's costly [health care](#) system.

A sweeping bill unveiled in the Democratic-controlled House last week is to be weighed in hearings beginning Tuesday. The draft legislation, written without Republican help, would require all Americans to purchase health insurance and would put new requirements on employers, too.

Meanwhile, delays continued in the slower-moving Senate, as the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee jettisoned an end-of-week deadline for passing its bill.

"We won't get the whole bill done" before the July 4 recess, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., acknowledged Monday after an afternoon spent working on prevention issues. The most contentious portions remained incomplete - those dealing with the introduction of a new public plan to compete with private insurers, and what requirements employers will face to provide care to their workers.

Obama's goal for signing a bill in October to control costs and provide health coverage to 50 million uninsured Americans appears in doubt.

But Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, is doggedly pursuing a compromise. "We will get a bipartisan agreement," he insisted Monday.

Of the five House and Senate committees working on health care, Finance is the only one that appears to have a chance at reaching a bipartisan agreement. Baucus planned to huddle behind closed doors Tuesday with a group of senators he's dubbed the "coalition of the

willing." Others involved are top committee Republican Charles Grassley of Iowa; Republicans Mike Enzi of Wyoming, Orrin Hatch of Utah and Olympia Snowe of Maine; and Democrats Kent Conrad of North Dakota and Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico.

Looming over everything is the cost question. Initial estimates had Senate plans topping \$1 trillion over 10 years, and senators are laboring to scale back. Deep cuts to Medicare and Medicaid are assured, and a range of taxes are under consideration, along with the possibility of fees on employers who don't cover their employees.

The Senate's health committee is waiting for revenue estimates from the Congressional Budget Office on three different scenarios for employer requirements, according to Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., who's leading the committee during Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's treatment for brain cancer. They are a requirement that employers provide health coverage for employees or pay a fee; an approach requiring employers to chip in to the federal treasury for employees who are covered under public plans; and a scenario where employers who don't cover their employees would pay the government a set amount per employee.

AP Special Correspondent David Espo and Associated Press writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

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