

Obama tries to build momentum for health overhaul

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President Barack Obama gestures as he delivers a speech about education, Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2009, at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama will tell the nation in a prime-time address precisely how he wants to expand health care, pitching a fresh argument - but, to liberal disappointment, no demand - for a government-run insurance option.

"The president's going to speak clearly and directly to the American people about what's in this bill for them," press secretary Robert Gibbs

said Wednesday, hours before Obama appeared before a rare joint session of Congress and a live national television audience.

Opening a final push for his top domestic priority, Obama will appeal for a health care overhaul that provides new and crucial protections for people who already have insurance, affordable access to coverage to those without, and reduced spending for families, businesses and government. Sitting in first lady Michelle Obama's box in the House gallery will be Americans who have suffered from high costs and insurance practices, and Obama will mention some specifically in his remarks.

The speech was just the opening salvo to a broader effort by Obama, with other events to follow, including a rally Saturday in the Midwest. On Capitol Hill, the top Senate negotiator, Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., said he would move ahead with legislation the week of Sept. 21 whether he has Republican backing or not.

"We do intend to get something done this year," Obama said on ABC's "Good Morning America."

Even as the president prepared to speak - and continued Wednesday to write and hone the approximately 35-minute address himself - the leader of the influential Senate Finance Committee raced to broker an overhaul proposal with both Democratic and Republican input, so far elusive.

And Republicans pressed their case that Obama's sweeping approach won't wash.

"The status quo is unacceptable. But if August showed us anything, it's that so are the alternatives that the administration and Democrats in Congress have proposed," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch

McConnell of Kentucky in prepared remarks. "That means sensible, step-by-step reforms, not more trillion-dollar grand schemes."

On one of the most closely watched portions of the address, a senior administration official said the president will make a case for why he still believes a public insurance plan is the best way to introduce greater competition into the system.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Obama told her and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid during a White House meeting on Tuesday that his message to critics of such an option would essentially be: "If you have a better idea, put it on the table."

But the White House official, who discussed the speech on grounds of anonymity because preparations remain under way, also said Obama would not insist that such an option be included in any final package or signal willingness to use his veto over the divisive issue.

"I'm open to new ideas," the president told ABC. "We're not being rigid and ideological about this thing."

That stance is sure to be viewed as far too timid by the liberal base of Obama's Democratic Party, which is increasingly fighting for the creation of a government insurance option. Liberal lawmakers say they won't vote for legislation without it.

But with Republicans and many moderate Democrats saying they won't vote for one with it, the issue has become Obama's main quandary as he seeks to salvage a health care overhaul this year.

Baucus said after a meeting with Democrats on the panel: "I think frankly with increasing conviction that a public option cannot pass the Senate."

Baucus has been circulating a proposal that would cost \$900 billion over 10 years and guarantee coverage for nearly all Americans, regardless of medical problems. Fees on insurers, drug companies and others in the health care industry would finance tax credits to help expand coverage. Baucus' panel is the only one of the five involved in health care not to complete a bill yet, and the only one still searching for a bipartisan compromise.

One provision would fine families up to \$3,800 for failing to buy health insurance, essentially requiring that everyone have medical coverage, much like the case with car insurance. Obama rejected a mandate, and fines, during his presidential campaign.

The plan does not include a government-run insurance option.

Baucus asked his "Gang of Six" bipartisan negotiators to report back with suggestions by Wednesday, hoping for an agreement before the president's address.

Few appeared ready to move that fast. "That's the cart before the horse, as they say in Maine," said Sen. Olympia Snowe, a moderate Republican being courted by the White House.

There was little sign by midday that an agreement was in the offing. One of the negotiators, Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said talks were ongoing and included "some things that are very central."

On the House side, Democrats met to plot strategy and set another similar meeting for Thursday morning. "Clearly failure is not an option here," said Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Calif., a member of the Democratic leadership.

Obama scheduled his address for a day after lawmakers returned from

an August recess marked by contentious town halls and much misinformation and confusion about what a [health care](#) overhaul may look like.

White House officials said the president will "answer all the major questions" - including the sticky issue of how to pay for getting coverage for the 50 million Americans who lack it.

A senior administration official said Obama has ceased worrying about whether he gets any Republican participation.

But that is no longer Obama's biggest difficulty, a fact underscored by the conflicting advice he was getting from within his own party.

"I hope he will call for a pragmatic, bipartisan approach," said Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D., head of the fiscally conservative Blue Dog coalition. "I support necessary change, but not radical change."

But liberal Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y., said Obama must say he is prepared to fight for a public option. "That's how bills get passed," Weiner said. "It's that or a retreat."

Gibbs appeared on NBC's "Today" show and CBS's "The Early Show."

Associated Press writers Ben Feller, Erica Werner, Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Ben Evans contributed to this report.

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