

White House: Dems near accord on health care bill

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President Barack Obama speaks in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House in Washington, Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010, before signing an executive order creating the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

(AP) -- The White House and congressional leaders are preparing a detailed health care proposal designed to win passage without Republican support if GOP lawmakers fail to embrace bipartisan compromises at President Barack Obama's summit next week.

A senior White House official said Thursday that Democratic negotiators are resolving final differences in House and Senate health bills that passed last year with virtually no Republican help. The White House plans to post the proposals online by Monday morning, three days

ahead of the Feb. 25 summit, which GOP leaders are approaching warily.

The comments signal that Obama and Congress' Democratic leaders still plan to use assertive and sometimes controversial parliamentary powers to enact a far-reaching [health care bill](#) if no GOP lawmakers get on board. Republicans and conservative activists have denounced such a strategy, and it's unclear whether enough House and Senate Democrats would back it. Both parties have used the strategy, known as reconciliation, in the past.

Obama says he is open to Republican ideas for changing the [health care legislation](#). But many Democrats seriously doubt GOP leaders will support compromises that could draw enough lawmakers from both parties to create a bipartisan majority.

The negotiations, led by Democratic leaders with White House input, are meant to determine what changes must be made to the Senate-passed bill for [House Democrats](#) to accept it, the administration official said. The goal is to craft a reconciled measure that Senate Democrats can pass, under rules barring GOP filibusters, unless Republicans offer acceptable changes at next week's summit.

Democrats lost their ability to block filibusters when Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown won a Senate seat last month.

The White House official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private negotiations.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said Thursday that Obama plans to have a health care proposal that "will take some of the best ideas and put them into a framework" ahead of the Feb. 25 summit.

House Democrats insist on several changes to the bill the Senate passed on Christmas Eve. They include reducing or eliminating a proposed tax on generous employer-provider health plans, and eliminating a Medicaid subsidy aimed only at Nebraska.

Overall, the Democratic plans would provide health insurance to more than 30 million people now uninsured and end the industry practice of denying coverage to those with medical problems. Most Americans would be required to carry health coverage, with new government subsidies available to reduce the cost for many.

The main beneficiaries would be small businesses and people who now buy their own insurance. They now have few choices, and premium prices can spike unpredictably from year to year.

Under the Democrats' legislation, they would be able to pick a plan in a new insurance marketplace offering a range of choices similar to those available to federal employees.

The cost of the legislation - about \$1 trillion over 10 years - would be paid for through Medicare cuts and a series of tax increases. In the short run, the nation would spend more on health care under the Democratic plans, since newly covered people would be able to get care they had previously put off. Over time, however, the rate of increase in medical costs would begin to slow.

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