

House vote pressures White House on health care (Update)

November 15 2013, by Steven R. Hurst



Insurance company representatives arrive at the West Wing of the White House in Washington, Friday, Nov. 15, 2013, to meet with President Barack Obama about the problems with the rollout of the new health care law. (AP Photo/ Evan Vucci)

(AP)—Republicans in the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly Friday to expand President Barack Obama's plan to fix a key provision in his health care overhaul, a move that could ultimately undermine the law and the administration's top legislative achievement.

A day earlier, Obama had moved to calm widespread anger over the cancellation of millions of private insurance plans that were ruled inadequate under his Affordable Care Act, widely known as Obamacare. Those cancellations—just one of several problems to emerge in the launch of the ambitious health care law—were issued despite Obama's repeated assurances that Americans could keep their insurance coverage if they were satisfied.

The House measure is unlikely to reach a vote in the Democrat-controlled Senate and faces an Obama veto threat. It would allow insurance companies to continue offering plans to current and new customers, even though the coverage had been deemed unacceptable under Obamacare. That could badly damage plans to finance the program.

The United States is the only major developed nation that does not have a national health care system for all citizens. Obama has been trying to repair the damage from the deeply troubled launch of what was meant to be a program that would help define his legacy.

The complex law is meant to provide health insurance coverage to tens of millions of Americans who had been unable to afford or meet qualifications for coverage. The act also outlawed insurance company practices of cancelling coverage for policy holders who became seriously ill and from denying coverage to those with existing health problems.



Members of the House of Representatives leave during a series of votes on a measure to let insurers keep offering health coverage that falls short of the law's standards, Friday, Nov. 15, 2013, on Capitol Hill in Washington. A day earlier, the president changed course in the face of a public uproar over the flawed debut of the Affordable Care Act and said he would take administrative action—which doesn't need congressional approval—to let companies continue selling such plans for at least another year. Unlike the House GOP bill, he would permit such sales to insurers' existing customers only, not to new ones.(AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

The health overhaul was to be financed by forcing all Americans to buy health insurance or pay a fine. The additional cost of providing benefits to now-uninsured Americans was to be balanced by bringing young and healthy customers into the insurance pool.

But leaving in place the existing private insurance plans, many of which are inexpensive but offer only minimal coverage, could diminish insurance company income and cause prices to rise.

In an uncharacteristically apologetic appearance on Thursday, Obama said the millions of cancelled private policies could be reinstated through 2014. But the House measure that passed Friday allows insurance companies to continue selling the policies to anyone who wants one.

Insurance companies have warned that the reinstatement of cancelled policies might be impossible by a Jan. 1 deadline to sign up for coverage.

As problems have grown since the Oct. 1 launch of the website at the center of the program, the president has faced increasing pressure from fellow Democrats worried about next year's elections—and from Republicans who never wanted the law at all.



House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Va., center, leaves the office of House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Friday, Nov. 15, 2013, before a vote on a measure to let insurers keep offering health coverage that falls short of the law's standards. A day earlier, the president changed course in the face of a public uproar over the flawed debut of the Affordable Care Act

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Before the House vote, Speaker John Boehner said it was time to scrap the law "once and for all."

Obama, who tells of watching his now-deceased mother battle with her insurance company as she was treated for ovarian cancer, came to office determined to fix the American health care system.

Republicans saw that as excessive intrusion into the private lives of citizens. With their current majority in the House, virtually all of Obama's legislative proposals have been blocked in the lower chamber, and attacks on the health care law have escalated.

Meanwhile, Obama's approval ratings in polls have fallen to record lows.

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