Senate Republicans unveil US health bill—but lack votes to pass it (Update)

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US Senate Republicans on Thursday unveiled a revamped health care plan aimed at fulfilling President Donald Trump's pledge to repeal Obamacare, but a revolt by four conservatives put the bill in immediate jeopardy.

Democrats meanwhile formed a united front against the controversial measure, blasting it as a "war on Medicaid," the health care program for lower income Americans.

For the past seven years, Republicans have plotted a course for repeal of the landmark health reforms of Trump's Democratic predecessor Barack Obama.

Senate Republicans are painting the new bill as less austere than the one passed by the House of Representatives last month which, according to a forecast by the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), would leave 23 million fewer people insured than under current law.

But the 142-page draft would allow states to drop several benefits mandated under current law, such as maternity care and hospital services, and also abolishes the requirement for most Americans to have health insurance.

It however delays cuts to the Medicaid program and maintains tax credits included in the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—commonly known as Obamacare—to help lower-income Americans purchase insurance for at

least two years.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell unveiled the bill, drafted in secret by a handful of lawmakers and aides, at a closed-door session with party faithful.

Four Republicans quickly came out in opposition—Ted Cruz, Mike Lee, Ron Johnson and Rand Paul.

That is a problem for the party leadership— Republicans hold 52 out of 100 Senate seats, so they can afford only two defections.

Asked what would need to be included to get him on board, Paul said: "It has to look less like Obamacare light—it's got to look like what we promised."

"It looks to us like the Obamacare subsidies will remain in place and... we think that the spending actually may exceed Obamacare spending in the next two years," he added.

Getting to 50 votes

Lawmakers will be "looking to see if there are things that we can do to refine it, and make it more acceptable to more members in our conference, to get to 50," Senator John Thune said.

"Right now the challenge is—how do we get to 50."

Trump, who campaigned heavily on a pledge to dismantle Obamacare, remained confident.

"It's going to be very good," the president said. "Little negotiation, but it's going to be very good."

McConnell said a fresh CBO score on the new bill was expected next week, and there will be "robust debate" on the floor.

He also said there would be an open amendment process to allow changes. He wants a final vote by the end of the month.

Any new Senate bill would have to be reconciled with the House version.

'Meaner'

Top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer blasted the new bill as "heartless," warning it would eventually cut Medicaid even more steeply than the House legislation, which slashes it by $800 billion over a decade.

"This is a bill designed to strip away health care benefits and protections from Americans who need it most in order to give a tax break to the folks who need it least," Schumer said.

While Trump reportedly called the House bill 'mean,' Schumer said "the Senate bill may be meaner."

The new legislation would eliminate federal funding for Planned Parenthood, a non-profit health organization that Trump's administration has targeted for cuts because it provides abortion services.

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