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Protesters plead for Sen. Roy Blunt to be cautious when voting to repeal Obamacare

Will Schmitt , WSCHMITT@NEWS-LEADER.COM 7:39 p.m. CST December 20, 2016

(Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)

Fullscreen

Photos: Protesters ask Blunt to preserve parts of Obamacare

About 40 protesters gathered Tuesday outside Sen. Roy Blunt's Springfield office to plead for the Missouri Republican to be cautious when voting to decide the fate of the Affordable Care Act.

The rally, organized by Missouri Heath Care for All, Missouri Jobs With Justice and Indivisible Missouri, included testimony from people in Springfield and Joplin who said the health care law, nicknamed "Obamacare," had been a force for good in their lives. Speakers and supporters said while they didn't aim to change Blunt's mind, they wanted to see plans for a viable replacement before a repeal vote.

"Repeal and replace Obamacare" has been a consistent message from Trump and Congressional conservatives since Nov. 8. House Speaker Paul Ryan has said doing away with the health care law will be a top priority (http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/4/paul-ryan-obamacare-repeal-to-avoid-disruption-in-/), and it's unclear how much of — which has popular provisions but is opposed by a majority of Americans (http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/obama_and_democrats_health_care_plan-1130.html#polls) — will survive or what might be enacted instead.

In a statement provided to the News-Leader by communications director Brian Hart, Blunt said he had "heard from many Missourians who are struggling under the president's health care law, which has left them with higher costs and fewer options than they had a year ago."

As he did in an October column in the News-Leader (/story/opinion/contributors/2016/10/22/blunt-obamacare-disaster/92612778/), the Missouri Republican cited data that indicated most counties in Missouri would have only one insurer participating in the ACA exchange and said most Missourians buying plans through the exchange had to deal with rising premiums.

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People in favor of the Affordable Care Act stand outside of Sen. Roy Blunt's office on Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. The protestors told stories about their experiences with health care and hoped to get a meeting with Sen. Blunt to voice their concerns about the possible repeal of the ACA. *(Photo: Andrew Jansen/News-Leader)*

"Missouri families shouldn't be punished for a law that just isn't working, and isn't living up to the president's promises," Blunt said. "That's why it's critical that we move forward with repealing the law, and paving the way for real solutions that will expand access to quality, affordable health care for all Missourians."

The protesters were led by Crystal Brigman Mahaney, deputy director of Missouri Health Care for All. Mahaney said she wasn't naive about changing Blunt's position on the ACA but wanted to stress the good the law has done.

One of the speakers was Nikki Straw, a Joplin retiree, who credited the insurance marketplace created by Obamacare with keeping her alive. She said she was diagnosed with lupus, an incurable autoimmune disease, and was covered through the exchange.

One of the ACA's more popular provisions prohibits insurance companies from refusing to cover people with pre-existing conditions or health problems. Straw now is covered through her husband's employer, but she says that if he loses his job and there's no Affordable Care Act, she will have no insurance and will die.

Others at the rally urged support for Medicare and Medicaid, which might also see significant changes under the Trump administration.

Arielle Speer, a master's student of social work living in Joplin, said her son suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from the 2011 tornado that pulverized Joplin. Speer's son receives mental health care through Medicaid, but she fears that Blunt and others might vote to take away that coverage.

The group huddled and shared stories outside Blunt's office at 2740 E. Sunshine St. before heading inside to speak to Dan Wadlington, a field representative manning Blunt office's front desk.

Two police officers stood by in the parking lot. They said had been called by the chiropractor's clinic next door out of concern that patients would not be able to park.

Wadlington listened patiently as protesters, some visibly upset, explained to him the situations they were in and how they relied on Obamacare. He didn't argue with the protesters but did remind them that no health care reform plans had been finalized. Wadlington told the News-Leader the protesters called the office ahead of time to say they were coming, and he didn't consider them a disruption.

One of the protesters was Phil Snider, a pastor at Brentwood Christian Church. Snider told Wadlington he hoped Blunt would be a good Samaritan and argued that helping those suffering from medical crises was "a pro-life issue" and "the mandate of Jesus." Snider also said that Jesus Christ not only healed sick people but did so free of charge.

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