

GOP health care overhaul vote draws protesters to Rep. Billy Long's Springfield office

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(Photo: Will Schmitt/News-Leader)

Two groups protested outside Rep. Billy Long's office in Springfield on Thursday as Republicans in Washington, D.C., negotiated the terms of a proposal to overhaul the American health care system.

Long is on record as a supporter of the partial repeal (</story/news/politics/2017/03/21/long-shrugs-off-gop-divisions-over-obamacare-replacement/99465858/>) of the Affordable Care Act. He says the GOP's new bill, the American Health Care Act, will help Missourians and shrugged off left-leaning analysis that says Missouri stands to lose \$3 billion in Medicaid funding over a decade.

"If you vote no, you're voting yes for Obamacare," he told the News-Leader on Tuesday.

Long's support wasn't shared by the two groups of people who gathered near his office Thursday, some of whom acknowledged that their actions would not change the congressman's vote.

First, representatives from the NAACP's Springfield branch and Faith Voices of Southwest Missouri presented a letter to Royce Reding, Long's local district director. The letter, written by Cheryl Clay of the local NAACP and Susan Schmalzbauer of Faith Voices, credits the Affordable Care Act with improving health care coverage for women and African-Americans and implores Long to repair Obamacare instead of gutting it.

"We should be working together to improve and expand the ACA so that all Americans, regardless of what they look like, who they are, or where they live, have high quality and affordable health care and coverage," Schmalzbauer and Clay wrote. "Please contact us in the near future to let us know what you are doing to address the problems of uneven care and inadequate coverage in America, and what we can do to help eliminate these life-threatening crises."

There were several speeches with a similar message — "Don't vote for the AHCA" — and Reding listened for several minutes until the group closed with a prayer from Emily Stirewalt, a pastor at Campbell United Methodist Church.

"For those whose dreams for a better future will be cut short by the loss of care," Stirewalt prayed, punctuated by a response of "we lift our hearts in prayer" from the others. "For our legislators, that they may be converted by the calling of their faith to the mandate of compassion."

Speaking to reporters afterward, Reding was appreciative that the group took the time to deliver their message.

"They were very cordial and respectful, and they just wanted to come by and pray for us," Reding said. "We welcome that opportunity and appreciate their concern."

In addition to referencing Long's recent comments to the News-Leader, Reding said "the Affordable Care Act has been something that has not been a good policy for his constituents" and said Long's office was closely following changes to the bill.

Reding did not address one of the protesters' core complaints: the possibility that millions of Americans, including thousands in Long's district, might lose health care coverage through Medicaid cuts.

Signs directed at Rep. Long. Numerous people here upset about potential loss of funding for Planned Parenthood. [pic.twitter.com/5T6HL85wDx](https://t.co/5T6HL85wDx)

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— Will Schmitt (@ws_missouri) [March 23, 2017](https://twitter.com/ws_missouri/status/844967546860244992)

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Later, a few hundred feet from Long's office, about 40 people lined up alongside East Battlefield Road. Most displayed signs expressing pro-ACA or anti-AHCA sentiments at the rally, organized by Missouri Health Care for All. Several holding signs expressed concern that the bill Long planned to vote for would negatively affect tens of thousands of his own constituents.

Many demonstrators also were there to support Planned Parenthood, which could lose funding under the new bill. One volunteer, Erin Kappeler, held a sign that featured the faces of Long, Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., and Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens under the words, "Missouri's Death Panel."

Greitens was one of eight governors to sign a letter of support for the AHCA (/story/news/politics/2017/03/23/greitens-endorses-house-gop-health-bill-even-its-prospects-sink/99555116/) sent Thursday to Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky. Also on the letter was Gov. Eric Holcomb of Indiana and Gov. Sam Brownback of Kansas.

Blunt has been noncommittal about the bill, telling the Washington Post (https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/an-even-bigger-challenge-if-health-care-reform-emerges-from-house-the-senate/2017/03/23/209f9c88-0f4b-11e7-ab07-07d9f521f6b5_story.html?utm_term=.8007d9931d19) that he and other senators were "waiting to see what they send over" from the House.

Some of the protesters acknowledged that the Affordable Care Act has not been received well by everyone.

"Obamacare is on a death spiral," said Gil Mobley, a local physician and political activist. "We need to make some changes to that. But it does not include throwing people off."

Higher premiums have been one of the chief complaints about the Affordable Care Act. Analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation (http://kff.org/interactive/tax-credits-under-the-affordable-care-act-vs-replacement-proposal-interactive-map/) indicates that premiums would generally decrease for wealthier individuals and increase for older individuals under the Republican replacement plan. A 40-year-old making \$40,000 annually in Greene County might see premiums drop by more than one-third, but a 60-year-old earning the same income might have to deal with premiums that are almost three times higher than their current payment.

Mobley flatly disagreed with the notion that the new bill might decrease premiums, which he said would increase until Americans lived healthier lives.

"Get over it, America. You're sick as hell and you're gonna pay for it until you straighten up," Mobley said.

The protest's message seemed to resonate favorably with many passing drivers. On one occasion, protesters' cheers were dampened when they realized a driver who honked at them was pointing to his pro-Trump bumper sticker.

"Wait until he cuts something you use," one sign-holder muttered.

The scene in Springfield was likely calmer than on Capitol Hill, where House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin, was scrambling to get the necessary votes for the AHCA, which would partially repeal and replace provisions of the ACA. Doing away with President Barack Obama's signature law has been a priority for Republicans across the country and was a frequent topic in President Donald Trump's stump speeches.

The new bill (http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/republican-health-care-vote-everything-you-need-know-n737336) — nicknamed "Ryancare" or "Trumpcare" by some — is not a true repeal of Obamacare. It leaves intact some of the more popular provisions of the ACA, such as requiring insurers to cover people with pre-existing conditions and allowing young people to stay on parents' insurance plans until they turn 26.

But the current system would be dramatically changed under the GOP bill, which replaces existing tax credits tied to income with tax credits based on age. Obamacare's insurance mandate would be scrapped and replaced with a rule allowing insurers to hike premiums for people who forgo coverage. And Ryan's bill cuts taxes for wealthier Americans.

While the outcry to the GOP bill from the left has been noisy as expected, congressional leaders also have had to deal with conservative opposition. Members of the right-wing House Freedom Caucus have jeopardized the bill's passage (http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/22/politics/house-health-care-bill/) by threatening to join the Democratic minority in voting "no," and organizations backed by Republican megadonors Charles and David Koch have promised financial support (http://time.com/4710418/koch-brothers-donald-trump-republican-health-care/) to Republicans who continue to oppose the bill.

To placate hard-liners, the Trump-Ryan coalition attempted a compromise involving eliminating 10 categories of essential health services (http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/22/politics/essential-health-benefits-obamacare-freedom-caucus/) — such as hospitalization, maternity, pediatric and neonatal care, mental health treatment and emergency services. But early reports from the Capitol indicate that passing AHCA remains a challenge.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the AHCA would save the federal government hundreds of billions of dollars (http://www.businessinsider.com/gop-obamacare-repeal-ahca-300-billion-deficit-medicaid-cuts-2017-3) over the next 10 years, due in part to whopping cuts to Medicaid spending. In addition to people who would drop their insurance voluntarily without fear of Obamacare's mandate, several million Americans would be knocked off Medicaid.

A vote on the AHCA was delayed Thursday as negotiations between members of the Freedom Caucus and more moderate House members left open the possibility that more Obamacare provisions could be nullified. After the protests, USA Today (/story/news/politics/2017/03/23/cbo-says-latest-gop-health-care-bill-would-cost-more-not-expand-coverage/99553348/) reported a new analysis from the CBO that determined a similar number of people (24 million) would be left without insurance but projected less savings for the federal government after revisions were made to the bill.

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