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TOP STORY

Group rallies in support of Affordable Care Act

By Jordan Larimore jlalimore@joplinglobe.com 11 hrs ago



GLOBE | ROGER NOME Mary Gaarder, of Joplin, lends her support for the Affordable Care Act during a demonstration on Tuesday morning in Joplin.








A drizzly rain on an already cold morning Tuesday in Joplin didn't stop a group of demonstrators from gathering to protest plans to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Organized by Missouri Health Care for All, a coalition advocating for expanding access to health care, the local demonstration was one of seven across the state.

Joplin regional organizer Dottie Elbert was happy with the eight people who lined up in the elements with signs at 32nd Street and Range Line Road.

The Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature health care legislation, has long been the target of criticism from Republicans in Congress. The GOP-controlled House of Representatives has already taken steps toward repealing the law, which President-elect Donald Trump has been pushing.

Those steps have raised concerns among people — including some Republican lawmakers — who question what the replacement for the ACA will be.

Republicans appear split on how to replace the program. House Speaker Paul Ryan has said he will soon unveil details of his proposal for a replacement. Trump recently told the Washington Post that he has a proposal that will force drug companies to negotiate Medicare and Medicaid prices with the government and will offer "insurance for everybody," and Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., has proposed a plan that emphasizes private health savings accounts and tax credits.

"To tear down the house without having a place to live is not really a good thought," Elbert said.

The White House estimates 20,000,000 Americans rely on health insurance plans provided through ACA exchanges. The law also allows people to stay on their parents' insurance plans until they turn 26 and prohibits companies from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions.

Ryan has said the new plan will retain those aspects of the ACA and that Congress will not act to repeal the Affordable Care Act until it can immediately replace it.

Elbert said her organization would prefer for those provisions of the law to remain intact while lawmakers attempt to improve the ACA, rather than resorting to a broad-strokes repeal.

"It shouldn't be a political issue, but that's the arena we're in," she said. "So yeah, our hopes are that legislators listen to each other and talk and figure it out."

Joan Banks, one of the demonstrators in Joplin, said she was concerned about people who will lose their health insurance if the ACA is repealed with no replacement program in place. Banks lamented the Missouri Legislature's decision not to expand Medicaid after a 2012 Supreme Court ruling made doing so optional. Medicaid expansion originally was a mandatory part of the Affordable Care Act as a means of covering people who were not eligible for federal subsidies the ACA provides to those who qualify.

"We have so many people in this state who are not covered by any kind of insurance," Banks said. "And the rest of us suffer with higher insurance rates, so I just hope they'll keep 'Obamacare,' or the ACA, intact and not repeal it. We need good health care in this state."

Also among the protesters Tuesday morning was Nikki Straw, who said a health insurance plan from the Affordable Care Act exchange allowed her to seek treatment for an undiagnosed chronic illness. Using her ACA health insurance, Straw was diagnosed with and treated for the autoimmune disease lupus.

She was able to enroll on her husband's private insurance plan in December, but had no other option for coverage at the time, she said.

"It's very important that everyone have some kind of health care," Straw said. "It doesn't mean that it's free, that you don't want to pay for it, it's just that we've got to have something out there."

Rep. Billy Long, R-Mo., this past week voted in favor of a budget resolution that would create a framework for repealing the ACA. In a statement, Long called the law “disastrous” and said his vote was the fulfillment of a promise to his constituents.

“Obamacare continues to let the American people down,” Long’s statement continued. “It’s unacceptable and the American people deserve better. I look forward to supporting legislation that is patient-centered, allows for more choices and is at a much lower cost.”

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., has also expressed support for repealing the ACA, calling on Senate Democrats to do the same.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., said she is open to changes that improve the health care law, but that there must be a replacement if it is repealed.

“With elected Republicans now fully in charge of government, I’m ready to hear their plan to cover as many people — including folks with pre-existing health conditions — at a lower cost,” McCaskill said in a statement. “They’ve had seven years to come up with such an alternative — all the while saying ‘repeal and replace’ — but I still haven’t seen their plan to ‘replace.’”

Report released

On Tuesday, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office released a report studying the legislation from a 2015 attempt at repealing the parts of the ACA that penalizes individuals who do not carry some form of health insurance and the law’s government subsidies.

That law, the CBO found, would have increased the number of uninsured Americans by 18,000,000 in its first year and to 32 million over the next 10 years. The study also found that insurance premiums would increase by as much as 25 percent in the first year and double by 2026.

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