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Hartzler staff meets with protesters as health care vote postponed



Vicky Hartzler

Rudi Keller Mar 24, 2017

With a vote possible soon on the Republican proposal to change federal health care laws, a small group of protesters visited U.S. Rep. Vicky Hartzler's Columbia office to urge her to oppose the bill.

While the 11 people organized by Missouri Health Care for All did not achieve their goal, several were invited into the office by Hartzler staff members Steve Walsh and Spencer Tuma for a discussion about the bill and why Hartzler intends to vote for it.

"Our concern is that the congresswoman is supporting legislation that will result in her constituents losing health care," said Sarah Gentry, the organization's policy director.

U.S. House leaders postponed the vote because of opposition by conservatives in their ranks, but remained committed to the bill Republicans are pushing as the first step to repealing the 2010 Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare. If it passes, it faces stiff opposition from Democrats in the Senate as well as harsh criticism from many Republicans in the upper chamber.

In the meeting, Walsh challenged Gentry's description of the impact of the bill called the American Health Care Act. The Congressional Budget Office report that estimates 24 million people who have insurance now won't be covered by 2026 is only an estimate, he said. Other aspects of the law, such as repealing a requirement for particular coverage in every insurance plan, will lower premiums, he said.

In addition, the repeal of a requirement that people buy health insurance is not the same thing as the government taking away their insurance, he said.

"It says there will be fewer people with coverage," Walsh said. "There is a distinction, with a difference, because young people, many of them, and maybe older people, will choose not to purchase the insurance they are now required to purchase under the law. It is not that they are losing it, it is that they are choosing not to purchase coverage."

Missouri Health Care for All on Thursday sponsored protests in each of Missouri's congressional districts and is planning five more demonstrations around the state today, including a rally at noon at Columbia City Hall.

The CBO report on the Republican bill puts the number of people who will no longer be covered into three groups — people who will lose government-paid Medicaid, people who will not have individual insurance plans and people who will not be able to obtain insurance through their employer.

In 2018, the report states, 4.9 million people will no longer have Medicaid because of eligibility changes, a number that grows to 14.4 million by 2026. There will be 6 million people who no longer have private plans and 2 million who will not have employer-sponsored plans.

An analysis of the bill, prepared by the Kaiser Family Foundation, was used by the Missouri Democratic Party to target Hartzler because it shows that many Boone County residents purchasing individual market plans would receive less in tax subsidies and pay more out-of-pocket in premiums under the Republican plan.

A 60-year-old person, making \$30,000 per year, would lose \$7,070 in tax subsidies and pay \$11,730 more than under current law due to an allowance for higher premiums for older people, according to the Kaiser report. A 60-year-old person with an income of \$50,000 would lose \$4,450 in tax subsidies and pay an additional \$9,110 for their coverage. The per capita income in Boone County is \$26,609 and median household income is \$50,520, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures.

"Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler's planned vote to hike health care premiums for older Missourians in order to fund a huge tax break for the wealthy couldn't make it any clearer that she isn't on the side of Mid-Missourians," party chairman Stephen Webber said in a news release.

Losing Medicaid coverage is not a voluntary act, Gentry said afterwards.

Hartzler changed from undecided on the bill to a vote in favor of it when she received assurances that recipients of tax credits offered in the bill will not be able to use the money to pay for abortions.

"Tax credits, as you know, really amount to taxpayer dollars and she is vehemently opposed to the use of taxpayer dollars for abortion in the past," Walsh said. "She continues to be opposed to the use of taxpayer dollars for abortion."

The protest began at 8:30 a.m. and, while it was small, many people passing on Providence Road honked in approval of their presence.

Pam Holt, an IBM retiree, said she is lucky because her former employer contributes to her health insurance premiums. Her daughter, however, has a thyroid condition that kept her from working before she obtained a policy under Obamacare.

"Once she was able to get the Affordable Care Act in place, she can now get her thyroid medicine, she is a productive member of society and if the Affordable Care Act goes away, she is back where she was," Holt said.

Hartzler won her first race for Congress on a promise to repeal the Affordable Care Act and in three elections since has not received less than 60 percent of the vote. In 2016, she carried all 24 counties of the Fourth Congressional District.

Since the new Congress opened, however, Hartzler has become the target of regular protests over health care. She has declined to hold an in-person town hall meeting, instead speaking with constituents during a telephone meeting.

Rebecca Shaw said Hartzler's political fortunes could be changing.

"I think her inability to hold a town hall in Columbia shows that she is scared of us a little," Shaw said. "I think that honestly, word is getting out to rural areas. People are losing their health care. People are going to be concerned about that. That affects everyone. And I think she is going to have an opponent this time around that will possibly reach out to a broader base."

This story was first published online on Thursday, March 23, 2017 at 1:22 p.m.

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