

Joplin joins "rush hour rally" to protest health care plan repeal

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About 16 protesters in Joplin waved signs and chanted outside of U.S. Rep. Billy Long's office Wednesday morning.

They were there asking Long, a Springfield Republican, to vote against the repeal of the Affordable Care Act and Republican replacement plan called the American Health Care Act.

More "rush-hour rallies" around the state took place Wednesday and will again today outside the offices of Missouri members of Congress, according to advocacy group Missouri Health Care for All.

Long has voiced support for the replacement plan and has been vocal about his opposition to the Affordable Care Act.

"Obamacare is failing of its own volition," Long said in an interview with the Globe. "If we don't do something, (people) will be in a lot more trouble than they are now."



Long said he feared that the country would have to move to a single-payer system if the ACA wasn't repealed. He stressed that the replacement bill was just the first of three steps of a Republican plan to improve health care and that promises made will still be kept.

The Republican plan keeps the "not-all-bad" facets of the Affordable Care Act, Long said. Insurance companies must still cover pre-existing conditions and people will still be allowed to stay on their parents' plans until they are 26.

The U.S. House is slated to vote today on the American Health Care Act, which can only lose about 20 Republican votes in order to be passed.

Support for the replacement bill has been tepid, especially after the Congressional Budget Office predicted 24 million Americans will lose health insurance by 2026 under the new bill. Criticism of the bill has been bipartisan, with some conservatives calling the plan "Obamacare 2.0" or "Obamacare Lite."

"I've never said this is going to go flying through," Long said. "Everybody I talk to has got a different reason not to like it."

Bob Gideon, of Carterville, protested outside of Long's office in Joplin because of his wife. Unlike 67-year-old Gideon, she wasn't old enough to get health insurance through Medicare, nor was she a disabled Vietnam veteran eligible for health care through Veterans Affairs.

She bought insurance through the ACA exchange in Missouri. He called it "blessing," especially when she had a six-day stay in the hospital a couple of years ago for small-intestine obstruction. Her health insurance covered what would have been an exorbitant expense, he said.

"If she hadn't had it, I don't know what we would have done," Gideon said.

Gideon said the deductibles in the new plan, especially for someone of their age and income level, are too high. His wife needs ongoing checkups so physicians can monitor her health.

"With our income, she wouldn't qualify for the same stuff she gets now," Gideon said.

Long said in an interview that he understands Gideon's concerns for those who fell in the coverage gap between 50 and 64 before they were eligible for Medicare, but he rejected the premise that deductibles will be higher for the elderly under the new plan.

Mary Plunkett, 61, of Joplin, said all of those at the protest, though they might not participate in the exchanges, help prop up the system by being taxpayers. She said she was concerned that there would be no way to pay for the plan if the mandatory insurance penalty was rolled back, as the replacement plan proposes.

She said "it seems silly" that Republicans would start from scratch instead of reforming the ACA.

"I think the Affordable Care Act needs to be corrected, but I believe as a nation as wealthy as ours, we should have health care for everyone," said Plunkett, who doesn't identify as Democrat or a Republican.

She said she doesn't think their protests would change Long's mind. Rather, she wanted to use her First Amendment right to make her concern known.

"I think most people care about this and show it in different ways," Plunkett said.

Long said he gets approached by those "who are not putting on a show for the camera" whenever he's in the district and running errands.

"They say, 'You stick in there. You stick in there. You get that repeal,'" he said. "I've heard more in the last month than in the last six years."