

Oregon Senate votes to make health care a right

Resolution would ask voters to decide whether affordable health care is a fundamental human right

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
Associated Press

SALEM — The Oregon Senate on Thursday, March 18, approved a resolution that would ask voters to decide whether the state is obligated to ensure every resident has access to affordable health care as a fundamental human right.

The resolution, whose aim is to amend the state Constitution, was approved along party lines, with Democratic senators in favor and Republicans opposed. It next goes to the House in the Democrat-controlled Legislature.

A similar effort in 2018 was approved by the House but it died in committee in the Senate. If it had been put on the ballot and approved by voters, it would have been the first constitutional amendment in

any state to create a fundamental right to healthcare.

“Every Oregonian deserves access to cost-effective and clinically appropriate health care,” said Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner. “Oregon’s Constitution should reflect that truth.”

If the House passes the bill, voters would be asked to consider amending the state’s 162-year-old Constitution.

Republicans said any promise to ensure all Oregonians are entitled to health care lacks financial backing.

“The bill doesn’t fund any system to deliver on that promise,” Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod said. “If Democrats are serious about giving Oregonians free health care, they should come up with an actual plan.”



A Life Flight Network air ambulance lands May 1, 2020, at St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton. The Oregon Senate on Thursday, March 18, approved a resolution that would ask voters to decide whether the state is obligated to ensure every resident has access to affordable health care as a fundamental human right.

The resolution says the state’s obligation must be balanced against funding public schools and other essential public services.

Senate Republicans claimed in a statement that the League of Women Voters of Oregon

has opposed this measure “because of its obscurity.”

But in a Feb. 15 letter, the League of Women Voters of Oregon said it supports the resolution, and called it “simply an aspirational bill.”

This year, as the coro-

navirus pandemic persists, “will be pivotal for national and state health care reforms,” League President Rebecca Gladstone and healthcare specialist Bill Walsh wrote. “It’s time to continue to do our part in this effort by involving

voters in the process.”

Asked to explain why Senate Republicans claimed the League has opposed the resolution, caucus spokesman Dru Draper pointed out that the League had opposed it in 2018.

A League president — Gladstone’s predecessor — had sent a letter in opposition in 2018, saying the state couldn’t afford “the added cost of health care coverage for all its residents at this time.”

But Gladstone said things are different this time.

“We are pleased to see provisions added to this 2021 bill that will balance health care with the public’s interest in funding schools and other essential public services,” Gladstone said in an email late March 18. “This seems to be a direct response to the League’s work on the 2018 bill, when we advocated for provisions that would protect funding of these essential services.”

Oregon to pay expanded jobless benefits ‘without delay for most people’

By **MIKE ROGOWAY**
Oregonian/OregonLive

SALEM — The Oregon Employment Department said Wednesday, March 16, that most people receiving expanded benefits through the new coronavirus relief package won’t experience any delay in payments as those programs kick in.

Payments will continue “without delay for most people,” said David Gerstenfeld, the depart-

ment’s acting director. That includes most contract workers receiving benefits through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program and extended benefits through the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program.

However, Gerstenfeld warned that some people who had used up all their benefits under those programs before Congress extended them last week

may have payments interrupted while the employment department adapts its computers to the federal changes.

“It will take some additional time there,” Gerstenfeld said on his weekly media call.

Oregon has paid \$8.1 billion in jobless benefits since the coronavirus pandemic began a year ago, though many unemployed people have had to wait weeks or

months for their money.

The \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill President Joe Biden signed last week extended temporary programs Congress established in March 2020 at the pandemic’s outset. Gerstenfeld said those extensions require time to implement on the department’s obsolete computer system, so people who didn’t have benefits remaining before the program will have to wait

an indefinite period for the computers to be updated before getting their money.

Oregon is in the process of replacing its computers, which date to the 1990s. That project has been stalled several times of the past 12 years, but Gerstenfeld said the department is within a “couple of weeks” of finalizing contract language with a vendor chosen last year to do the work.

The state hopes the

project, which could cost \$123 million, will be complete in 2025.

In the meantime, thousands of Oregonians are still working to resolve outstanding claims. The department’s phone lines remain jammed with calls from people seeking information about the complex system of jobless benefits. Instead of calling, the department recommends trying its online form.

Brown urges program to insure remaining Oregon adults

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown has called on lawmakers to extend health insurance coverage to the estimated 6% of Oregon adults who still do not have it.

The Democratic chief executive testified Tuesday, March 16, for House Bill 2164 in the House Health Care Committee. Her proposed budget contains \$10 million to cover 2,000 adults.

Oregon estimates that 94% of adults and all children have coverage under federal, state or private insurance.

“The pandemic has taught us this is not good enough,” Brown said in her testimony. “And unfortunately, our communities of

color have paid the price. Gaps in coverage persist, and these gaps are disproportionately borne by communities of color.

“Everyone deserves access to health care. It’s the right thing to do, the just thing to do. And it’s smart economic policy.”

The bill would authorize the Oregon Health Authority to create a Cover All People program, modeled on the Oregon Health Plan, which as of March 8 covered 1.27 million people. It emerged from the health equity committee of the governor’s Racial Justice Council.

The new program would cover legal permanent residents, young adults who age out of Oregon’s Cover All Kids program, DACA recipients (young people

brought illegally to the United States as children) who have deferrals from deportation, and undocumented adults.

Brown said the new program is not just socially responsible but makes economic sense.

“Across agriculture, manufacturing, the service sector and our health care system, front-line workers from our immigrant and refugee communities have gone to work every day during the pandemic to very literally keep our society going. Many of them worked through wildfires and breathed harmful smoke,” she said.

“The very least we can do in a just society,” Brown added, “is to make sure they have access to this basic human right.”

Survey: Pessimism pours like rain in Oregon

By **ZANE SPARLING**
Oregon Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — A growing share of Oregonians think the state is headed down the wrong track, if not at risk of derailing completely, according to polling data from the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

Some 44% of residents are pessimistic about Oregon’s future, while 35% are optimistic and the remaining 21% are unsure. Those results show a flip-flop from summer 2020, when 43% believed the state was headed in the right direction.

“As a whole, the government is infuriating,” Melissa Aspell, one of the poll’s respondents, said in a phone interview. “There’s a lot of frustration with how Gov. (Kate) Brown runs things. And then clean up Portland, for God’s sake!”

Aspell, 39, of Bend, said she was concerned about the overgrowth of “cookie-cutter homes” in her neighborhood and the misallocation of government resources, but noted that local parks are well main-

tained and she has been able to receive a COVID-19 vaccination.

Roughly 600 Oregonians, who are part of a professionally maintained polling group, participated in the online survey in January, with participants selected to correspond with state demographics. The poll’s overall margin of error is 4%.

Here are the key findings:

- Democrats (51%) are more positive about the state’s near future, compared with Republicans (23%) and voters who belong to neither party (28%). Conversely, 66% of Republicans had a negative view of Oregon’s future, compared with 29% of Democrats and 48% of independents.

- Just 2% of poll respondents rated Oregon’s economy as excellent, vastly outnumbered by those who scored the state economy as poor (31%) or only fair (47%). Middle income earners (83%) were more likely to downrate the economy than the working class (74%).

- Nearly half of residents (47%) predict Oregon’s economy is getting worse, compared to 11% who see an upturn on the horizon and 36% who foresee it trending water. Women (52%) were more likely to predict tighter wallets than men (43%). The most pessimistic age group was the middle aged.

- A slim majority (53%) are very or somewhat worried about their personal finances, while 45% are not too worried or not at all worried. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those making less than \$50,000 are concerned about the state of their pocketbook, compared with 33% of those bringing in more than \$100,000 yearly.

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STATE NEWS BRIEFS

Oregon bills would increase access to menstrual products

SALEM — Several bills under consideration in the Oregon Legislature would help make menstrual products more readily available, including at schools and to some people who receive government assistance.

Senate Bills 717 and 521 and House Bill 3294 all address menstrual products, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

SB 717 would provide \$10 per month to people who receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to “purchase personal hygiene items.” The measure has support from the Oregon Food Bank and Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon with Matt Newell-Ching, public policy manager for the Oregon Food Bank, calling the investment critical in testimony to lawmakers.

SB 521 would exempt businesses from paying “commercial activity tax” on sales of period products, diapers, formula and prescription drugs. The tax was passed in

2019 to help Oregon fund education.

The third bill, HB 3294, would require public schools to provide pads and tampons to students at no charge. That bill, called the Menstrual Dignity Act, has more than 15 sponsors.

Oregon State president put on probation

CORVALLIS — Oregon State’s board of trustees have placed president F. King Alexander on probation for his role in handling sexual misconduct complaints while he was at LSU.

After a seven-hour meeting Wednesday night, the board ordered Alexander to come up with an “action plan” to regain the trust of his campus.

A report commissioned by the LSU board found there was a “serious institutional failure” in the school’s handling of Title IX cases during Alexander’s tenure. He served at LSU from July 2013 through 2019 and took the same position at Oregon State in 2020.

A number of Oregon State faculty and students

testified in a public hearing earlier in the day, calling for Alexander’s firing.

The board considered firing Alexander, USA Today reported.

Court revives UO suit alleging gender pay gap

EUGENE — A federal appeals court has revived a University of Oregon professor’s lawsuit alleging the university has failed to address a “glaring” pay gap between her and male colleagues.

Psychology professor Jennifer Joy Freyd argued that the university paid her thousands less per year than it paid four male professors though they were all of equal rank and seniority, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

A three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit of Appeals held Monday that a reasonable jury could find that Freyd and her male colleagues performed substantially equal work yet the men drew significantly higher wages.

The decision reverses a ruling in U.S. District court and moves the case back to the trial court.

— Associated Press

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