

# GOP leaders plan Tuesday health vote, it's an uphill climb

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican leaders pushed toward a Senate vote next Tuesday on resurrecting their nearly flat-lined health care bill. Their uphill drive was further complicated by the ailing GOP Sen. John McCain's potential absence and a dreary report envisioning that the number of uninsured Americans would soar.

The White House and GOP leaders fished Thursday for ways to win over recalcitrant senators, including an administration proposal to let states use Medicaid funds to help people buy their own private health insurance. But there were no indications they'd ensured the votes needed to even start debating the party's legislative keystone, a bill scuttling and supplanting President Barack Obama's health care law.

"Dealing with this issue is what's right for the country," said Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. He added, "It was certainly never going to be easy, but we've come a long way and I look forward to continuing our work together to finally bring relief."

As leaders tested revisions that might attract GOP votes, others began comparing the process with the trade-offs they scorned seven years ago as top Democrats pushed Obama's overhaul.

"It's almost becoming a bidding process — let's throw \$50 billion here, let's throw \$100 billion there," said Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn. "It's making me uncomfortable right now. It's beginning to feel a lot like how Obamacare came together."

In a blow, the Congressional Budget Office said McConnell's



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Ky. walks into the Senate Chamber on Capitol Hill, Thursday in Washington.

latest bill would produce 22 million additional uninsured people by 2026 and drive up premiums for many older Americans. Congress' nonpartisan fiscal analyst also said it would boost typical deductibles — the money people must pay before insurers cover costs — for single people to \$13,000 that year, well above the \$5,000 they'd be expected to pay under Obama's statute.

"Many people with low income would not purchase any plan even if it had very low premiums" because of that exorbitant deductible, the budget office said.

That dire outlook resembled one the office released last month on McConnell's initial bill, which the leader had to withdraw as Republicans rebelled against it.

Thursday's report seemed unlikely to do much better to help win over balking moderate Republicans upset over millions of voters losing coverage and cuts in Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor. These included Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Susan Collins of Maine, Ohio's Rob Portman and West Virginian Shelley Moore Capito.

The GOP's fissures have changed little for months.

Conservatives like Sens. Mike Lee of Utah and Texas' Ted Cruz want to loosen Obama's requirements that insurers cover numerous services and cap customers' costs, and some want to cut spending for Medicaid and other programs.

Conservative Rand Paul, R-Ky., is most interested in simply repealing

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— Bob Corker, U.S. Senator, R-Tenn.

the 2010 law. Moderates want to ease the spending reductions and leave consumer protections in place.

"There's a handful of folks who clearly have significant reservations" about backing the bill, said Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa. "But they haven't said no. They haven't said yes either."

Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., a member of the Senate leadership, said a vote was expected Tuesday afternoon. But senators suggested that might change with the possible long-term absence of McCain, the 80-year-old Arizonan who announced Wednesday he is battling an aggressive brain cancer and was home undergoing treatment.

Nursing a slender 52-48 majority and adamant Democratic opposition, McConnell has been unable to muster the 50 GOP votes he'd need to approve his party's health care overhaul. Vice President Mike Pence would cast the tiebreaking vote. Without McCain, the bill would fall if just two Republicans vote against it, and more than that have said they're ready to do so.

Looking for leverage, McConnell and his lieutenants were

arguing that Republicans should back the initial procedural vote to begin debate. Should it pass, they reasoned, senators could force votes on any amendments they chose to propose.

In reality, senators were aware that that procedural vote would be viewed as a vote on whatever health care package leaders were pushing, perhaps reflecting changes negotiated with GOP senators. Several senators said leaders still hadn't decided what that might be.

Asked if senators would know beforehand what they'd be voting on Tuesday, the No. 2 Senate GOP leader, John Cornyn of Texas, told reporters, "That's a luxury we don't have." Cornyn spokesman Drew Brandewie later said the lawmaker was referring to the unpredictability of the final shape of the bill after amendment votes.

McConnell presented his reworked bill last week after adding \$45 billion to help states combat overdoses of drugs including opioids and \$70 billion to help insurers control consumers' costs. It also retained tax increases Obama placed on wealthier people to help finance his coverage expansion to 20 million additional people.

And it included a Cruz provision, crucial for winning conservatives' votes, letting insurers sell low-cost policies with minimal coverage. Conservatives say it will reduce premiums, but opponents say it would result in healthy people buying the cheap policies, leaving many with serious medical conditions unable to afford the fuller coverage they need.

## BRIEFLY

### Even with Trump warning, Mueller likely to probe finances

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's growing anxiety about the federal Russia probe has spilled into public view with his warning that special counsel Robert Mueller would be out of bounds if he dug into the Trump family's finances. But that's a line that Mueller seems sure to cross.

Several of Trump's family members and close advisers have already become ensnared in the investigations, including son Donald Trump Jr. and son-in-law and White House senior adviser Jared Kushner. Probing the family's sprawling business ties would bring an investigation the president has called a partisan "witch hunt" even closer to the Oval Office.

Trump told *The New York Times* it would be a "violation" of Mueller's formal charge if he looked into the president's personal finances.

That comment came amid news reports that the special counsel is interested in Trump's business transactions with Russians and with one of his main lenders, Deutsche Bank.

In the same interview with the *Times*, Trump also lashed out at Attorney General Jeff Sessions; James Comey, the FBI director he fired; Andrew McCabe, the acting FBI director who replaced Comey, and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who appointed the special counsel. The president's comments were a reminder of Trump's willingness to target his own appointees and blur lines that have traditionally existed between the White House and Justice Department investigations.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Thursday that Trump had no intention of firing Mueller "at this time," but she did not rule out doing so in the future.

She also reiterated Trump's concern about the scope of Mueller's investigation, saying it "should stay in the confines of meddling, Russia meddling, and the election and nothing beyond that."

California Rep. Adam Schiff, top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, said Mueller has the authority to investigate any ties the Trump family has to Russia, "including financial, and anything that arises. That is his duty."

### Publicly assailed by Trump, Sessions says he's staying on

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Jeff Sessions, publicly skewered by his boss for stepping clear of the Russia-Trump investigations, declared Thursday he still loves his job and plans to stay on. Yet Donald Trump's airing of his long-simmering frustrations with Sessions raised significant new questions about the future of the nation's top prosecutor.

The White House was quick to insist that the president "has confidence" in Sessions. However, the episode underscored how the attorney general's crime-fighting agenda is being overshadowed by his fractured relationship with Trump and the continuing investigations into allegations of Russian ties to the Republican candidate's presidential campaign.

The challenges for Sessions were laid bare Thursday when the attorney general, at a Justice Department news conference to announce the takedown of a mammoth internet drug marketplace, faced zero questions about that case and was instead grilled on his reaction to being excoriated by Trump in a *New York Times* interview a day earlier. The news conference on the drug case was quickly ended once it was clear reporters would only ask about the interview.

Sessions did not directly address his relationship to Trump except to say he was still carrying out the agenda of the president.

It all followed Trump's statements to the *Times* that he never would have tapped the former Alabama senator for the job had he known a recusal was coming. Sessions took himself off the Justice Department-led case in March following revelations he'd failed to disclose his own meetings with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. That placed the investigation with his deputy, Rod Rosenstein, who in May appointed former FBI Director Robert Mueller to serve as special counsel.

### U.S. says ban on laptops in airplane cabins lifted

DALLAS (AP) — The ban on laptops in the cabins of planes flying from the Middle East to the U.S. is over, as federal officials say that large airports in the region have taken other steps to increase security.

Those measures include checking electronic devices to make sure they don't

contain a bomb, and pulling more people out of airport lines for additional screening.

A spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security said Thursday that all airlines and airports with flights departing for the U.S. had met the agency's first phase of new security measures, which were announced in late June but not described in any detail.

In March, the U.S. imposed a ban on laptops in the cabins of planes coming into the country from 10 Middle Eastern airports. This week, King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, was the last of the 10 to comply with U.S. security measures and exit the laptop-ban list.

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly said the ban was a stopgap measure until airports could make other security improvements.

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Senior Financial Advisor  
lnewman@dadco.com

**Mark Hales, CWS®**  
Senior Vice President,  
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