

Congress clears temporary spending bill to avert shutdown

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-led Congress narrowly passed a temporary spending bill Thursday to avert a government shutdown...

The measure passed the House on a 231-188 vote over Democratic opposition and then cleared the Senate, 66-32, with Democrats from Republican-leaning states providing many of the key votes.

The stopgap legislation would keep the government from closing down at midnight Friday. It has traversed a tortured path, encountering resistance from the GOP's most ardent allies of the military...

The wrap-up measure allows Republicans controlling Washington to savor their win on this week's \$1.5 trillion tax package — even as they kick a full lineup of leftover work into the new year.



Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, R-Wis., right, shakes hands after presenting a pen to House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Kevin Brady, R-Texas, left, as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., second from left, watches after signing the final version of the GOP tax bill during an enrollment ceremony at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday.

health care and national security along with legislation to increase the government's authority to borrow money.

Each of those items is sure to test the unity that Republicans are enjoying now.

"Now it gets down to some very difficult decisions on how we move forward in the first and second quarter of next year," said Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., a leader of a powerful faction of

hard-right Republicans. "There is a lot to do next month. I'm not worried today. I'll wait until January to be worried, OK?"

Democrats had initially pressed for adding their priorities to the measure, but once rebuffed on immigration they worked to keep the bill mostly free of add-ons, figuring that they'll hold greater leverage next month.

Among the items left behind was \$81 billion worth of disaster

aid, which passed the House on a bipartisan 251-169 tally but stalled in the Senate. The measure would have brought this year's tally for aid to hurricane victims in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean, as well as fire-ravaged California, to more than \$130 billion.

"Democrats want to make sure that we have equal bargaining, and we're not going to allow things like disaster relief go forward without discussing some of the other issues we care about," said powerful Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Immigration is among the most difficult issues confronting lawmakers in January, thrust upon them in September after Trump rescinded a Barack Obama order giving these so-called Dreamers protection against deportation, though he gave Congress a March deadline to come up with a legislative solution.

"They embody the best in our nation: patriotism, hard work, perseverance," House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California told the chamber's Rules Committee on Thursday. "We should not leave them to celebrate the holidays in fear."

Trump and Republicans are pushing for additional border security and other immigration steps in exchange.

"The vast majority of Republicans want to see a DACA solution. They just want to see a DACA solution that's balanced," said House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., referring to the program's name, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Also left unfinished were bipartisan efforts to smash budget limits that are imposing a freeze on the Pentagon and domestic agencies, a long-term extension of the popular Children's Health Insurance Program for 9 million low-income kids and Senate legislation aimed at stabilizing health insurance markets.

"At some point we've got to make the hard decisions," said Republican Sen. John Thune of South Dakota.

Instead, lawmakers struggled to achieve the must-do: a \$2.1 billion fix for an expiring program that pays for veterans to seek care outside the Department of Veterans Affairs system; a temporary fix to ensure states facing shortfalls from the Children's Health Insurance Program won't have to purge children from the program; and a short-term extension for an expiring overseas wiretapping program aimed at tracking terrorists.

BRIEFLY

U.S. Senate paid nearly \$1.5M in harassment claims

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate has released a bare-bones report showing it's paid nearly \$1.5 million in taxpayer money over the past two decades in what senators say were harassment settlements.

A two-page release reveals no names of lawmakers or victims and few details.

It says \$599,000 was for 13 settlements involving "member-led" Senate offices. The remaining \$853,000 was for 10 settlements involving "other" Senate offices.

Senate Rules Committee Chairman Richard Shelby says in a statement that workplace

harassment shouldn't be tolerated, "particularly not in the United States Senate."

The document says the largest settlement was \$421,000 and was for "race discrimination and reprisal."

While the press statement refers to "harassment settlement data," none of the individual settlements' descriptions use the word "harassment." Many involved sex, age, race and disability discrimination and reprisals.

Pence to Afghan president: U.S. is 'here to see this through'

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Vice President Mike Pence told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on a secret visit to Afghanistan on

Thursday that the U.S. is "here to see this through" as they discussed a newly announced U.S. strategy to break the stalemate in America's longest war and consulted on upcoming parliamentary elections.

Pence's surprise pre-Christmas visit was the first to the war-torn country by either Trump or the vice president, and it came as the Trump administration charts a pathway for ending the 16-year war in Afghanistan.

"We're here to see this through," Pence told Ghani and Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah at the presidential palace in Kabul, arriving after a helicopter ride through smoky, dark skies surrounding Afghanistan's capital.

Later, at a rally-style event at Bagram Air Base, Pence told hundreds of U.S. troops: "I believe victory is closer than ever before."

"It's because of all of you that we're safe. It's because of you that we're free. It's because of you that freedom has a future in Afghanistan and America and all across the wider world," Pence said, his voice raspy from a cold.

'Obamacare' surprise: Strong showing as nearly 9M sign up

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a remarkably strong show of consumer demand, nearly 9 million people signed up for "Obamacare" next year, as government numbers out Thursday proved predictions of its collapse wrong yet again.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said more than 8.8 million people have signed

up in the 39 states served by the federal HealthCare.gov website.

That compares to 9.2 million last year in the same states — or 96 percent of the previous total.

The level exceeds what experts thought was possible after another year of political battles over the Affordable Care Act, not to mention market problems like rising premiums and insurer exits. On top of that, the Trump administration cut enrollment season in half, slashed the ad budget, terminated major payments to insurers, and scaled back grants for consumer counselors.

"This level of enrollment is truly remarkable, especially given the headwinds faced by the program," said Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON & EVENING

Table with columns for time slots (12 PM, 12:30, 1 PM, 1:30, 2 PM, 2:30, 3 PM, 3:30, 4 PM, 4:30, 5 PM, 5:30, 6 PM, 6:30, 7 PM, 7:30, 8 PM, 8:30, 9 PM, 9:30, 10 PM, 10:30, 11 PM, 11:30) and rows for various TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, etc.) listing programs and their descriptions.

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FRIDAY LATE NIGHT & SATURDAY MORNING

Table with columns for time slots (12 AM, 12:30, 1 AM, 1:30, 2 AM, 2:30, 3 AM, 3:30, 4 AM, 4:30, 5 AM, 5:30, 6 AM, 6:30, 7 AM, 7:30, 8 AM, 8:30, 9 AM, 9:30, 10 AM, 10:30, 11 AM, 11:30) and rows for various TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, etc.) listing programs and their descriptions.