



In this Jan. 5 file photo, Idaho State Insurance Director Dean Cameron speaks to reporters about a health insurance executive order at the State Capitol in Boise.

Idaho: No Obamacare needed for some new insurance plans

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Concerned about soaring health care costs, Idaho on Wednesday revealed a plan that will allow insurance companies to sell cheap policies that ditch key provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

It's believed to be the first state to take formal steps without prior federal approval for creating policies that do not comply with the Obama-era health care law. Health care experts say the move is legally dubious, a concern supported by internal records obtained by The Associated Press.

Idaho Department of Insurance Director Dean Cameron said the move is necessary to make cheaper plans available to more people. Otherwise, he said he fears the state's individual health insurance marketplace will eventually collapse as healthy residents choose to go uninsured rather than pay for expensive plans that comply with the federal law.

"There are other states that have been talking about it, but we may be out in front," Cameron said. "They may look to follow us should we be successful."

Many states have seen annual double-digit increases in health insurance premium

costs. That is expected to continue — and perhaps get worse — under the recently signed Republican tax plan.

The new tax law ended the Affordable Care Act provision that required people to buy health insurance or pay a tax penalty. Without the threat of a penalty, health care experts predict that younger and healthier people will go without policies. That will leave sicker patients in the marketplaces, forcing insurers to raise costs.

The Idaho plan would make it possible for insurance companies to offer cheaper plans that might be more attractive to people who have to buy their own insurance and do not benefit from the federal premium subsidies offered under the Affordable Care Act. The catch is that those plans would be skimpier.

Cameron on Wednesday offered details of the plan that was first announced by Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, a Republican, earlier this month.

Under Idaho's guidelines, insurers can offer plans that deny coverage for pre-existing conditions for up to 12 months unless the customer had continuous prior coverage.

Trump open to DACA 'morph'

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday he's open to an immigration plan that will provide a pathway to citizenship for hundreds of thousands of young people who were brought to the country as children and are now here illegally.

"We're going to morph into it," Trump told reporters. "It's going to happen, at some point in the future, over a period of 10 to 12 years."

But immediately after Trump spoke, a senior White House official cast doubt on Trump's assurances, saying a pathway to citizenship for so-called Dreamers was "maybe" an option.

"That's a discussion point," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because there was no authorization to discuss the issue publicly. The official added that Dreamers could immediately be given "legal status, as long as they behave themselves."

Trump's pronouncements — and the senior official's addendum — came as the White House announced it would be unveiling a legislative framework on immigration next week that it hopes can pass both the House and the Senate. The president's remarks amounted to a preview of that framework. He said he'll propose \$25 billion for building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border and \$5 billion for other security measures.

Trump told reporters he had a message for the Dreamers: "Tell 'em not to be concerned, OK? Tell 'em not to worry. We're going to solve the problem."

But Trump has said repeatedly that any deal to protect those immigrants from deportation is contingent on money for the border wall and other security measures.

Trump was talking about the young immigrants who had been protected from deportation and given the right to work legally in the country under the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA. Trump announced he was ending DACA last year, but he has given Congress until March to come up with a legislative fix.

Trump said he was confident that a deal can be reached on the issue. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the framework to be unveiled Monday "represents a compromise that members of both parties can support."

The White House was trying to take control of the process amid criticism that the president had taken too much of a back seat during recent negotiations and had sent mixed signals that repeatedly upended near-deals.



President Donald Trump speaks to a gathering of mayors in the East Room of the White House on Wednesday.

"After decades of inaction by Congress, it's time we work together to solve this issue once and for all," Sanders said.

The senior official added that the White House planned to notify Congress on Wednesday night "exactly what the president's position is. Cause that's what they've been asking for. Cause they haven't been able to come up with their own workable positions."

Senators from both parties were making a fresh search for their own compromise immigration legislation, but leaders conceded that the effort wouldn't be easy and were already casting blame should it falter.

Around three dozen senators from both parties met privately Wednesday, and two top lawmakers said they'd try crafting a compromise bill based on colleagues' suggestions. The goal is to produce consensus legislation that would be the starting point for Senate debate on immigration, which is expected to begin Feb. 8, said Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Dick Durbin, D-Ill., their parties' No. 2 leaders.

"We're the Senate, we have our own responsibility under the Constitution and we decided in this room to move forward," Durbin said afterward. "If the president has some ideas he'd like to share, of course we'll take a look at them."

When asked if he knew what would be in the White House proposal, Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said he didn't know and added, "But they're not writing the bill."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., vowed not to "let those who are anti-immigrant, who call giving the Dreamers hope 'amnesty,' block us. Because then we will fail, and it will be on the other side of the aisle that made that happen."

Schumer spoke about 12 hours after Trump put the onus on him. "Cryin' Chuck Schumer fully understands, especially after his humiliating defeat, that if there is no Wall, there is no DACA," the president tweeted late Tuesday. "We must have safety and security, together with a strong Military, for our great people!"

Sanders said the White House framework is based on dozens of conversations Trump and his staff have had with members of both parties and that "it addresses all of the different things that we've heard from all of the various stakeholders" during the past several months.

Sen. David Perdue, R-Ga., said Trump called him Wednesday morning and wants to provide "dependability for these kids," but still expects a deal to include money for border security and his promised southern wall, to limit immigrants' ability to sponsor family members and to end a visa lottery aimed at diversity.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said if senators cannot produce a compromise plan by Feb. 8, he would open a debate on immigration legislation that would be "fair to all sides." That suggests both parties would be allowed to offer amendments.

BRIEFLY

Congress members urge President Trump to ease off legalized marijuana states

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Colorado Rep. Jared Polis are leading a bipartisan push urging President Donald Trump to reinstate an Obama-era policy discouraging federal prosecutors from targeting individuals involved in the marijuana trade in states that have legalized the drug.

The Democrats and 52 other members of Congress have written a letter dated Thursday to Trump, after Attorney General Jeff Sessions lifted the policy earlier this month. Sessions said he would leave it up to prosecutors whether to crack down.

In the letter, the members say lifting the policy puts businesses, consumers and patients at risk.

Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington and the District of Columbia have legalized the recreational use of marijuana by adults.

Others have decriminalized marijuana or legalized its medicinal use.

Trump: Would 'love to' face Mueller — under oath

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump declared late Wednesday he's "looking forward" to being questioned — under oath — in the special counsel's probe of Russian election interference and possible Trump obstruction in the firing of the FBI director.

Trump said he would be willing to answer questions under oath in the interview, which special counsel Robert Mueller has been seeking but which White House officials had not previously confirmed the president would grant.

"I'm looking forward to it, actually," Trump said when asked by reporters at the White House. As for timing, he said, "I guess they're talking about two or three weeks, but I'd love to do it."

He said, as he has repeatedly, that "there's no collusion whatsoever" with the Russians, and he added, "There's no obstruction whatsoever."

The full scope of Mueller's investigation, which involves hundreds of thousands of documents and dozens of witness interviews, is unknown. And there have been no signs that agents aren't continuing to work on ties between Trump's campaign and a Russian effort to tip the 2016 election.

But now that Mueller's team has all but concluded its interviews with current and former Trump officials, and expressed interest in speaking with the president himself, the focus seems to be on the post-inauguration White House. That includes

the firing of FBI Director James Comey and discussions over the ouster of White House National Security Adviser Michael Flynn.

Senate narrowly approves Brownback for ambassador for religious freedom

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-led Senate on Wednesday narrowly approved Sam Brownback's bid to be U.S. ambassador for international religious freedom, setting the stage for him to resign the governorship in Kansas after seven contentious years in office.

With two Republican senators absent, Vice President Mike Pence traveled to Capitol Hill to cast the tie-breaking vote to confirm Brownback, a favorite of Christian conservatives for his views on same-sex marriage and abortion. The vote was along party lines, 50-49, underscoring the narrow margin Republicans hold. Pence's vote also was needed earlier in the day to get Brownback's nomination over a procedural hurdle.

Fellow Republican Lt. Gov. Jeff Colyer will be elevated to governor in Kansas once Brownback submits his resignation. That could come as early as next week.

"I'm glad to have the vice president in my corner," Brownback told reporters after a meeting with Kansas legislative leaders at the statehouse in Topeka.

In Davos, European leaders try to counterbalance Trump

DAVOS, Switzerland (AP) — European leaders came to the defense of free trade and global cooperation on Wednesday, laying out a vision to counterbalance what many perceive as a rise in the more brash, nationalistic policies of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Trump's expected arrival to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on Thursday overshadowed the event and many government leaders rushed to stand in contrast with Trump's policies, particularly his move to revise free trade deals and drop out of a climate change pact.

"We believe that isolationism won't take us forward," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the elite gathered in the snowy Alpine town. "We believe that we must cooperate, that protectionism is not the correct answer."

Merkel stressed there is too much "national egoism" at the moment and that the World Economic Forum's motto of "creating a shared future in a fractured world" was "exactly right" for 2018.

Concerns that the U.S. is turning its back on globalization were accentuated this week, when Trump backed new tariffs on imported components and large washing machines.

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