

Congress Must Act To Fix Exchanges

Immediately after House leadership pulled the American Health Care Act, Energy and Commerce Chair Greg Walden (R-OR) said he is shifting his attention to the exchange market and reauthorizing funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program and federally qualified health centers. Congress last funded CHIP and health centers in 2015 with the broadly bipartisan Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act, and the money runs out this year.

Senate Health Committee Chair Lamar Alexander (R-TN) said Congress should still do whatever it can to fix the individual marketplaces despite the House's failure to move its health care bill, especially in states at risk of having few or no health insurance choices for the 2018 policy year. Over the weekend, President Donald Trump said he would seek help from Democrats, whom have stated a willingness to work with the GOP on fixes but only if a repeal of the law is off the table.

In a statement shortly after the House leadership's decision to pull the bill, Alexander stressed a need to help rescue the 230,000 Tennesseans who buy insurance from that state's volatile exchange. "Unless Congress and the President act soon, these Tennesseans--some of the most vulnerable citizens in our state--are likely to have zero choices of insurance in 2018," Alexander said. "Millions of Americans in other states are facing the same dire circumstances. Congress has a responsibility to continue its work to solve this problem and to give more Americans more choices of lower-cost health insurance."

Alexander's colleague from Tennessee, Senator Bob Corker (R-TN), said he had a good talk with the president on Friday. "At some point," Corker said, "on behalf of the

American people, we have to resolve the issues that are driving up costs, limiting choices, and causing the individual market to spiral downward. I stand ready to work with the administration and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle in order to fix our broken health care system."

Neither senator offered specific plans, but Alexander has suggested for some time that lawmakers focus on repair over repeal.

In January, Senate Health Committee member Tim Kaine (D-VA) led a group of moderate Democrats in a letter agreeing there should be a bipartisan effort to fix the Affordable Care Act, while stressing that could not happen if there was a rush to repeal the law. "The American people deserve a constructive bipartisan conversation about improvements we know need to be made to our health care system, and that will require time for the two sides to work together," the Senators wrote at the time. "Any proposed changes must protect the parts of law that have helped our constituents access critically needed health care."

Alexander said he believes stabilizing the individual market for 2017, 2018 and 2019 is one area where there can be bipartisan agreement.

On Friday, Kaine stressed that American families still seek improvements to the health care system and Congress should not give up on making reforms. "As a member of the Senate HELP Committee, I look forward to bipartisan dialogue to enhance coverage, quality, and affordability," he said.