

CHA chairperson calls Senate health care legislation a 'travesty'

Hochman urges senators to 'take their time,' 'figure out what's best'

A U.S. Senate proposal to overhaul health insurance would be "a travesty for health care in the United States," said Dr. Rod Hochman, chairperson of the CHA Board of Trustees. "It is essentially taking \$800 billion over the next 10 years from health care and applying it for tax cuts."

Hochman is president and chief executive officer of Providence St. Joseph Health of Renton, Wash. The health system has said the bill currently under consideration would "dismantle much of the coverage gains created by the Affordable Care Act," and particularly gains in Medicaid coverage for vulnerable populations.

According to a CHA analysis of the Senate's Better Care Reconciliation Act of 2017, the current draft, which was released June 22, would repeal individual and employer insurance coverage mandates, modify premium tax credits and dramatically restructure and cut Medicaid funding. The changes would include setting a per capita cap on funding for most populations insured under Medicaid, establishing an optional block grant system for states to cover low-income parents and pregnant women and phasing out enhanced matching rates connected with Medicaid expansion, among other provisions.

The Better Care Reconciliation Act also would alter the premium tax credit amounts for people obtaining care through the insurance marketplace. It would do this in part by pricing premium tax credits for the individual market to lower value plans than under the Affordable Care Act. The CHA analysis says this will result in people buying less generous coverage or paying more to keep their existing plans.

"There is nothing in this bill that makes any sense to any of us in health care leadership. We think it's a tax cut bill, and not a health care bill," Hochman said.

A June 26 Congressional Budget Office report on the Better Care Reconciliation Act says the proposed legislation would increase the number of uninsured people by 22 million in 2026, as compared with those currently uninsured. The same report estimated the bill would reduce the cumulative federal deficit over a nine-year period ending in 2026 by \$321 billion.

Hochman said of particular concern is "the evisceration of Medicaid." He said Medicaid is "a plan that really protects the most vulnerable populations, particularly children, elderly in nursing homes, disabled, folks who are addicted to opioids. All those things we were really trying to do something about, improving the health of those individuals."

According to information from Providence St. Joseph Health, more than 5 million people in the seven states the health system serves have coverage because of Medicaid eligibility criteria expanded under the Affordable Care Act. Those states are Alaska, California, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas and Washington. (Of these states, Texas did not expand Medicaid eligibility.)

Hochman said that in addition to the potential threat to health care access for the poor and vulnerable, the Senate legislation also could put health care jobs at stake. He explained if the legislation passes, "There's an impact that we will be feeling as health care organizations on our own ability to employ people and maintain all the services that we have to date, given what we're seeing with the bill in its present form."

Hochman said the Senate should "take their time. Let's figure out what's best for the health care of the American public and do this in a bipartisan fashion." He added that the Senate should take the time to consult health care organization leaders, to get their take on the best approach.

Hochman advised members of the ministry to communicate with their senators and speak out about the proposal's potential impact. "I think when members of Congress hear from individuals who are affected by this legislation it's most effective. So I'm really encouraging people who are going to be adversely affected by this to speak up."

Health care legislative work "should be done thoughtfully and it shouldn't negatively impact the most vulnerable members of our society," he said.