

Obama: America just two steps away from health insurance reform

Written by Pharoh Martin, NNPA National Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - When the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, banged the gavel and declared, "The bill is passed," health care reform that President Obama and Democratic leaders have pushed for so fervently over the past year came one step closer to reality on Saturday, November 7. The Senate is next.

Black lawmakers, their Democratic colleagues in the House of Representatives and civil rights leaders celebrated the passage of H.R. 3962 the Affordable Health Care for America Act, a landmark bill that aims to reform the health care system in America.

The Democratic-controlled House narrowly passed the hotly-debated measure on Saturday night with a 220-215 vote. Only one Republican supported the bill.

President Obama called the passage of health care reform in the House "historic."

"Thanks to the hard work of the House, we are just two steps away from achieving health insurance reform in America," Obama said in a statement. "Now the United States Senate must follow suit and pass its version of the legislation. I am absolutely confident it will, and I look forward to signing comprehensive health insurance reform into law by the end of the year."

The legislation aims to provide stability and security for Americans who have insurance; quality affordable options for those who don't; and bring down the cost of health care for families, businesses, and the government while strengthening the financial health of Medicare. And it is legislation that is fully paid for and will reduce our long-term federal deficit, the president said.

The Congressional Black Caucus held a press conference the day before the historic vote to reinforce their support for the public option and tout their push for inclusion of specific provisions that are pertinent to African-Americans and other racial minorities.

"In August, we saw the public option appear to be going no where," said Barbara Lee, (D-CA) Chairwoman, Congressional Black Caucus. "We were able to work with caucuses to make sure that we have in this bill a strong public option. When nobody else was speaking about racial and ethnic disparities, the Congressional Black Caucus and our Tri-Caucus put those issues with our Health Equity and Accountability Act on the table," she said.

After the vote Lee applauded the efforts of her colleagues and the Democratic leadership for passing a bill with a strong public option, but urged that there is still much work to do.

"When others were pronouncing health reform dying — and the public option dead and buried —we kept on fighting! And we will keep fighting until a final health care bill is on the president's desk; one that includes not only a strong public option, but provisions to achieve health equity, eliminate health disparities and to limit the rate of increase for those with private plans," Lee said.

Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) called the bill far from perfect. But, he said that he supported the legislation because the bill, with the public option included, will expand coverage to 96 percent of the population and end discrimination based on pre-existing conditions.

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"I voted for this bill because the cost of inaction is too high," the Michigan congressman said. "Each year, 44,000 people die because they do not have access to insurance. Without reform, this number would rise. Americans would be at greater risk of losing their coverage, and our business community would continue to fall behind international competitors as their future profits are drained by burdensome health care costs."

Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) called the bill's passage "one of the most important moments in our history." He said, "It has been a long tough struggle, but we took significant steps this evening toward making a powerful difference in the lives of every American ... This is not a perfect bill, but it is the beginning we must make to transform health care in America and make sure that health care is a right and not a privilege."

The NAACP, National Urban League and The Black Leadership Forum commended Congress for the bill's passage.

"Tonight, our Congress people made a decision to stop letting so many of our neighbors die for lack of affordable health care coverage," said NAACP President and CEO Benjamin Jealous. "We applaud them for including the public option. The public option means more choice, more competition, lower costs, more families covered, and few forced into bankruptcy."

Executive Director and CEO of the Black Leadership Forum Gary L. Flowers said that the bill's passage represents a victory for all of America not just Black America.

"The urgent need for health care reform brought together over 50 civil rights organizations to relay our concerns, and together we were able to ensure that Congress indeed heard our voices," Flowers said.

Republicans remained vehemently opposed.

Michael Steele, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, also released a statement. "Nancy Pelosi and her liberal lieutenants made a lot of promises today to get the votes they desperately needed," he said. "Make no mistake - the Democrat leadership's assurances were based on political expediency, not principle. Anyone receiving a promise from Pelosi is guaranteed to be disappointed in the end when their votes are no longer needed."

The president will be able to sign an amalgamated bill comprised from components from both chambers of Congress. But the Senate still has to pass a bill, and that is less certain. The health care bill in the Senate faces not only stiff opposition from Republicans, but also from Democratic moderates.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) is threatening to back a Republican filibuster if the bill contains a public option. Without Lieberman's crucial support, Senate Democrats will not be able to block a filibuster, a stalling strategy to indefinitely hold up a vote on the bill. If the bill passes the Senate, the final step will be to hold a conference of representatives from the House in order to reconcile the two bills into one, after which both Houses will revote on the reconciled bill.