

Legislative Report

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Obama Health Plan to Cover 12 Million Illegals

On Friday, July 15, Democrats moved one step closer to giving free health insurance to the nation's estimated 12 million illegal aliens when they successfully defeated a Republican-backed amendment, offered by Rep. Dean Heller, R-Nev., that would have prevented illegal aliens from receiving government-subsidized health care under the proposed plan backed by House Democrats and President Barack Obama.

The House Ways and Means Committee nixed the Heller amendment by a 26-to-15 vote along straight party lines, and followed this action by passing the 1,018-page bill early Friday (7/15) morning by a 23-to-18 margin, with three Democrats voting against the plan.

The Democratic plan will embrace Obama's vision of bringing free government medical care to more than 45 million uninsured people in America – a significant portion of whom are illegal aliens.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, costs under the Obama plan being proposed by the House will saddle citizens with \$1.04 trillion in new federal outlays over the next decade.

Congressional Democrats and Obama have argued that their health plan is necessary to contain rising health care costs.

But, last Thursday(7/14), CBO Director Douglas Elmendorf testified before the Senate Budget Committee and warned lawmakers that the proposed "legislation significantly expands the federal responsibility for health care costs."

A key factor increasing costs is the Democratic plan provides for blanket coverage to as much as 15 percent of the U.S. population not currently insured, including illegals.

Democrats had insisted throughout the health-care reform debate that illegals would be ineligible for the so-called public option plan that is to be subsidized by taxpayers.

"We're not going to cover undocumented aliens, undocumented workers," Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, told reporters in May. "That's too politically explosive."

Republicans, however, point out that the Democrats, by refusing to accept the Heller amendment, would deny health agencies from conducting simple database checks to verify citizenship. Many states give illegals driver licenses, which will be sufficient to get free health care under the plan.

Critics also contend that millions of illegals who already have counterfeit Social Security cards or other fraudulent documents. There is no enforcement mechanism in the legislation, experts say, to prevent illegals who use fake IDs to obtain jobs from also obtaining taxpayer-subsidized health insurance.

GOP representatives introduced the amendment to provide a way to weed out non-citizens from the program.

A description of the amendment on Heller's Web site states it would "better screen applicants for subsidized health care to ensure they are actually citizens or otherwise entitled to it."

The Heller amendment would have required that individuals applying for the public health care option would be subject to two systems used to verify immigration status already in use by the government: The Income and Eligibility Verification System (IEVS) and the Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) program.

The two systems cross-reference Social Security numbers and employment information to establish whether an individual is a U.S. citizen.

Critics: Free Health Care Means More Illegals

A recent Rasmussen Reports poll found that an overwhelming 80 percent of Americans oppose covering illegals in any public health care bill.

Anti-immigration activists say the availability of low-cost benefits, including health insurance and in-state tuition, will only lure more immigrants to come to the United States.

Political analyst Dick Morris, in his recently released best-selling book "Catastrophe", warns that giving illegal free health care will lead to a flood of new illegals who can take advantage of such a benefit not offered in their home countries.

William Gheen, president of Americans for Legal Immigration, agrees with that sentiment, writing, "Each state and federal elected official must know that illegal aliens should not be given licenses, in-state tuition, mortgages, bank accounts, welfare, or any other benefit short of emergency medical care and law enforcement accommodations before they are deported."

But a small fraction of illegals end up deported, as many make widespread use of fake IDs to easily gain access to government benefits programs.

"Experts suggest that approximately 75 percent of working-age illegal aliens use fraudulent Social Security cards to obtain employment," wrote Ronald W. Mortensen in a recent Center for Immigration Studies research paper. Mortensen says one of the big misconceptions about illegals is that they are undocumented.

James R. Edwards Jr., co-author of *The Congressional Politics of Immigration Reform*, recently wrote on National Review Online that "it's hard to envision how health reform can avoid tripping the immigration booby trap."

Edwards says none of the legislation under consideration actually requires any state, federal, or local agency to check the immigration status of those who apply for the program.

The assumption is that companies have vetted their employees to ensure they are eligible for legal employment – a difficult task for employers given the active market in fraudulent documents. Thus Edwards maintains "some of the money distributed ... inevitably would go to illegal aliens."

The estimates of illegal aliens in the United States without health insurance vary. The most commonly cited statistic, attributed to the Center for Immigration Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, holds that 15 percent to 22 percent of the nation's 46 million uninsured are illegal aliens. That would be between 6.9 million and 10.1 million people. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama claimed the nation United States has 12 million or more undocumented aliens.

John Sheils of the Lewin Group, a health care consulting firm owned by UnitedHealth Group, recently told National Public Radio that about 6.1 million illegals – about half of all illegals in the United States – lack documentation and therefore would not be legally eligible for benefits under the current health care reforms.

Sheils says the other half of the nation's illegals – 5 million to 6 million – use false documents to obtain on-the-books employment. Many of them are already insured under their employers' plans, he added.

"A lot of those people are getting employer health benefits as part of their compensation," Sheils told NPR.

Certainly, some contend that undocumented workers who are gainfully employed and receiving benefits such as health insurance are contributing to society. But the fact remains that, once equipped with a fake ID, a person in the United States illegally can obtain both a job and the benefits that go with it.

Estimates of the cost of providing illegals with medical care vary. Most uninsured illegals who need medical attention obtain it from hospital emergency rooms. And several states are already straining under the huge burden of paying for the health costs of illegal aliens.

According to the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), in 2004 California's estimated cost of unreimbursed medical care was \$1.4 billion. **Texas estimated its cost at \$850 million annually**, and Arizona at \$400 million.

Non-border states shoulder heavy burdens as well. Virginia's annual cost of providing health care for undocumented workers is approximately \$100 million per year, FAIR reports, while Florida's health care cost is about \$300 million annually.

One of the ironies of the proposed legislation is that it would fine American citizens who opt not to purchase insurance coverage, but would exempt illegals from such fines. This is presumably due to the fact that they are not supposed to participate in the program anyway.

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Even if no illegals were likely to benefit from health care reform, Democrats have made it clear that amnesty is the next item on their ambitious legislative agenda.

"I've got to do health care, I've got to do energy, and then I'm looking very closely at doing immigration," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., declared in June.

Reid explained the urgent need for amnesty in terms very similar to those that Democrats have used to press for health care reform. "We have an immigration system that's broken and needs repair," Reid said.

Immigration expert Edwards, for one, says health-care reform may itself need serious medical attention before it is healthy enough pass through Congress.

"The American people may soon realize how much health reform will benefit immigrants and cost the native-born," he writes. "When that happens, the volatile politics of immigration could derail universal health care."