Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Proposal Blocked in Committee

Democratic Reps. **Scott Peters** (CA), **Kathleen Rice** (NY) and **Kurt Schrader** (OR) cast the deciding votes against allowing Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices Wednesday. The 29-29 tie vote in the House Energy and Commerce Committee came after a 3-day markup. Their votes prevent the provision from advancing, eliminating a key mechanism for paying for vision, dental and hearing care under Medicare.

Separately, a fourth House Democrat, Rep. **Stephanie Murphy** (D-FL), who is not on the Committee, also voted against a related Medicare drug price negotiation bill in the Ways and Means Committee this week.

With progress stalled at the Energy and Commerce Committee, attention is turning to the House Ways and Means Committee, which shares jurisdiction over health policy and which did back the plan on Wednesday to include the critical Medicare legislation. The language could also be inserted by the Rules Committee before floor debate on the social spending package.
The Alliance’s recent poll of voters age 65 and above found that an 87% majority of voters over age 65 favor allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices, including 48% who are strongly in favor. Among Democratic seniors, 89% are in favor, as are 87% of Republican seniors and 81% of independent seniors.

“Less than two years ago, all four of these Representatives voted for an even stronger bill to lower drug prices -- when it was clear that the Senate and President Trump would never allow it to become law,” said Richard Fiesta, Executive Director of the Alliance. “The reality is that Americans pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs, with seniors bearing the highest burden. We need members of Congress who say they favor lower drug prices to vote with retirees when it matters, not take votes that allow the drug corporations to continue price gouging.”

The Alliance is calling on its members in the districts of Reps. Murphy, Peters, Rice and Schrader to let their representatives know how upset seniors are that they caved to pressure from the pharmaceutical industry. Each member’s office can be reached by calling 202-224-3121.

**Senate Democrats’ Introduce New Voting Rights Bill**

Within days of Texas enacting a new voting restrictions law, Senate Democrats introduced the Freedom to Vote Act. The bill would make Election Day a federal holiday, establish same-day voter registration nationwide, set federal standards on mail-in voting, establish limited voter ID requirements and ban partisan gerrymandering.

The new legislation borrows heavily from the Democrats’ earlier push for voter protection, the For the People Act, which passed the House but was filibustered in the Senate. This bill would also need 60 votes to pass under the current Senate rules.

“Ensuring everyone has the right to vote should not be a partisan issue,” said Robert Roach, Jr., President of the Alliance. “This legislation would ensure that every eligible voter, no matter where they live, can cast a ballot easily and make their voices heard.”

**Democrats Look to Wealthiest Americans, Corporations to Pay for Reconciliation Bill**

House Democrats are crafting a deal to implement President Biden’s Build Back Better plan while keeping his promise that the revenue to pay for it will come only from Americans who earn more than $400,000 a year. The funding would address initiatives like long term care for seniors, health care, community college and child care as well as climate change.

Several House members are proposing that the top tax rate return to 39.6% on individuals earning more than $400,000 — or $450,000 for couples — in addition to a 3% surtax on wealthier Americans with adjusted income beyond $5 million a year. For businesses, the proposal would increase the corporate tax rate from 21% to 26.5% on companies’ annual income over $5 million. The 2017 Trump tax law cut the corporate tax rate from 35 to 21 percent.

“It is time that the wealthiest American billionaires pay their fair share so that we can afford things like home health care for seniors who are desperately trying to age in place,” said Joseph Peters, Jr., Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance. “President Biden has called for critical investments that
will help older Americans, including $400 billion for Home and Community Based Services to not only get seniors the care they need, but also to pay their caregivers a reasonable living wage and decrease worker turnover."

**Kaiser Health News: Over Half of States Have Rolled Back Public Health Powers in Pandemic**  
*By Lauren Weber and Anna Maria Barry-Jester*

Republican legislators in more than half of U.S. states, spurred on by voters angry about lockdowns and mask mandates, are taking away the powers state and local officials use to protect the public against infectious diseases.

Supporters of a bill that would prohibit public and private employers from requiring vaccinations or punishing workers who don’t receive them rally in favor of the legislation outside the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, on Aug. 24. Republican legislators in more than half of U.S. states, spurred on by voters angry about lockdowns and mask mandates, have passed laws to take away powers state and local officials use to protect the public against infectious diseases.

A KHN review of hundreds of pieces of legislation found that, in all 50 states, legislators have proposed bills to curb such public health powers since the covid-19 pandemic began. While some governors vetoed bills that passed, at least 26 states pushed through laws that permanently weaken government authority to protect public health. In three additional states, an executive order, ballot initiative or state Supreme Court ruling limited long-held public health powers. More bills are pending in a handful of states whose legislatures are still in session.

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