

May 4, 2017

Health care providers, organizations react to vote on American Health Care Act

Some area health care providers and advocates said the version of the American Health Care Act that passed the U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday is worse than [the original](#), but others are holding their tongues until it's closer to becoming law.

"We're going backwards," Tam St. Claire, president of the Bucks County Women's Advocacy Coalition, said of the bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, which passed by a vote of 217-213.

The coalition, which advocates for child care, health care, housing and other issues affecting women and families, released a [position paper](#) earlier this year when the bill was introduced stating that several of the provisions "will negatively impact women and their families and do nothing to control the spiraling health care costs to the consumer."

The shifting of Medicaid costs onto the states, the elimination of reimbursements to Planned Parenthood for providing services to Medicaid patients, and the switch in income-based tax credits to age-based tax credits, were among the provisions cited by the coalition.

Bucks has no Federally Qualified Health Centers and Planned Parenthood is the only "safety net provider" for low-income and underinsured or uninsured patients that offers family planning, Melissa Reed, CEO of Planned Parenthood Keystone said in a statement Thursday.

The bill would block more than 10,000 patients in Bucks and 90,000 across the state from accessing birth control, cancer screenings, and sexually-transmitted infection testing at Planned Parenthood, Reed said. "That will make it harder for women to prevent unintended pregnancy, harder to have a healthy pregnancy, and harder to raise a family."

St. Claire also called Thursday's vote irresponsible, given that the Congressional Budget Office has not yet released its analysis on the latest version of the bill. Previously, [the office projected](#) that 14 million Americans would lose or drop health insurance in 2018 under the AHCA, and as many as 24 million would be uninsured by 2026 as a result of changes to the tax credits and to Medicaid, which would be cut by \$880 billion over 10 years.

The coalition also is concerned about an amendment to the bill that was sponsored by New Jersey Congressman Tom MacArthur that would allow states to get waivers for the provision that prevents insurance companies from charging people with pre-existing conditions higher premiums for coverage if they let it lapse.

It also would create an \$8 billion fund to help those states implement high-risk pools or another system to help lower those premiums. [Opponents have said](#) the funding wouldn't be enough in Pennsylvania, however.

“(The amendment) was even worse for people, particularly women, because the pre-existing condition issue is very important for women and their families,” St. Claire said.

Among the conditions classified as such under the bill are domestic violence and sexual assault, which most people probably wouldn’t think of, said Julie Dugery, coordinator of volunteers, community outreach and public affairs for Bucks County’s Network of Victim Assistance.

Beyond care for physical trauma that may occur, survivors of sexual assault might need a variety of services, including mental health and treatment for coping mechanisms such as substance use or eating disorders, Dugery said.

“It can be a very complex victimization and so if those kinds of supports are not going to be covered under this iteration of health reform, that will have really some serious consequences for the survivors that we work with,” she said.

Dr. Sanjay Bhatia, chief medical officer at Lower Bucks Hospital, said probably most of the patients he sees come into the emergency department have pre-existing conditions. Bhatia, who also is a private practice partner with Mercer Bucks Medical Associates and founded a hospitalist physician group, said he has mixed feelings about the bill.

Bhatia is glad that young adults would be able to stay on their parents’ plans and that legislators are attempting to make revisions to improve the Affordable Care Act. But he’d also like to see more done with tort reform related to malpractice lawsuits, and he is concerned that more patients will begin to show up in the emergency department without coverage.

“It’s important for everyone to stay calm and cool,” he said, noting that there likely will be more revisions to the bill. “The hospitals are still here ... and we’re still ready, and we’re still going to provide the patients with care regardless of whether they can or can’t pay.”

Officials from Holy Redeemer Health System, Grand View Health and Doylestown Health did not comment on the bill, and representatives of Abington Hospital-Jefferson Health referred this news organization to The Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania.

In a statement, Andy Carter, president and CEO of the association, said the state’s hospital community was disappointed in the vote.

“Simply put, the American Health Care Act in its current form could devastate Pennsylvania families and care providers,” he said.

St. Mary Medical Center in Middletown and its parent organizations, Mercy Health System and Trinity Health, also expressed deep disappointment in Thursday’s vote in a statement.

“The American Health Care Act does not adhere to the principles that Mercy Health System, St. Mary Medical Center and Trinity Health have established for evaluating health care reform, and we will ask the Senate to consider alternative policy approaches,” the providers stated.

Independence Health Group President and CEO Daniel J. Hilferty also said in a statement Thursday that the Philadelphia-based insurer will continue to be part of the discussions on the changes to the health care laws.

“At Independence we support solutions that make health care more accessible for consumers and measures that provide stability and security in the marketplace,” he said. “Americans are best served by a competitive, private health insurance market that offers people the choices they want at a price they can afford.”

Ed MacConnell, president of Total Benefits Solutions, a benefits brokerage in Lower Southampton, wouldn't have voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act, but he said it wasn't going in a good direction.

"I would have fixed some of the things that needed to be fixed, as opposed to just tearing it apart and starting all over again, because now we're going to find out what needs to be fixed in this," he said.

One of those things was the number of insurers dropping out of the Health Insurance Marketplace. In southeastern Pennsylvania, only Independence Blue Cross remained in the exchange this year, MacConnell pointed out, and other states have been facing the possibility of having none.

"I hear all this about issues of pre-existing conditions not being covered, which are valid concerns, but if you can't get coverage, none of your conditions are covered," he said.

The Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, was tough for some of MacConnell's small business clients because it required many of them to spend money on record keeping and reporting requirements.

"I'm not talking about \$50 a year, I'm talking about thousands," he said. "For example, we have a client with 150 employees who offers a good health coverage, a very low deductible, but they still have to spend thousands of dollars a year just reporting that they gave those employees coverage."

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey did not comment on the vote or the bill on Thursday.

Bucks County Health Department Director Dr. David Damsker also said he is not comfortable commenting on the potential impact to public health programs until he sees a final bill. The Associated Press and other news organizations have reported that cuts to funding from the Prevention and Public Health Fund could hurt state and local health departments.

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