

State, local advocates say overhaul bill will tax health care

By Jenny Wagner

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As lawmakers convene a conference committee to reconcile the Senate and House versions of the tax overhaul, state and local advocates are voicing concerns about the impact the bill would have on health care.

In a conference call with reporters on Tuesday, Antoinette Kraus, executive director of the Pennsylvania Health Access Network, said the result would be “devastating” for families, women, older adults, people with mental health and substance use disorders, among others.

The Senate version, which narrowly passed early Saturday, would roll back the Affordable Care Act provision that requires people to pay penalties if they don’t have health care coverage. According to the Congressional Budget Office, that means the government would pay less to subsidize people’s plans, but people would pay about 10 percent more for their premiums over the next 10 years.

The budget office also estimated 13 million more people would be uninsured by 2027 as a result of the bill, said Marc Stier, director of the Pennsylvania Budget & Policy Center. That would equate to 500,000 more Pennsylvanians without insurance coverage, he added, pointing to a state-level analysis.

Stier and others said Medicare and Medicaid coverage also would be at risk as the federal government seeks ways to cut spending to offset the deficit increase under the tax bill, and as states face pressure to balance budgets without raising income taxes — people will no longer be able to claim them on their federal returns under the tax bill.

“This is a program that millions upon millions of Americans, millions of Pennsylvanians, rely on for health care once they turn 65,” said Ray Landis, advocacy manager for AARP Pennsylvania.

More and more Pennsylvanians struggling with opioid addiction also rely on Medicaid for health care, including treatment, Rosemarie Halt, director of health policy and practice for Maternity Care Coalition, pointed out.

Landis said AARP Pennsylvania also is concerned that people will no longer be able to claim high medical expenses, which many older adults rely on to offset rising costs for prescriptions and supplemental coverage.

Kraus pointed to an AARP nationwide analysis that showed more than half of people who took the medical expense deduction in 2015 had someone in their household over age 65, and nearly 70 percent had annual incomes below \$75,000.

“This is Robin Hood in reverse,” said Tam St. Claire, president of the Bucks County Women’s Advocacy Coalition. She said the tax bill would not improve economic security for women and instead would keep many from reproductive health care and planning services.

“The Bucks County Women’s Advocacy Coalition strongly opposes the tax bill that will have devastating consequences for most women and their families,” she said.

Faith leaders on the call also said they oppose the bill.

“I find the proposed Congressional tax bill horrific and morally bankrupt,” said the Rev. Bill Bloom of United Christian Church in Bristol Township. “For people of faith, health care is a moral issue. Health care is one of the three H’s that are the foundation of modern civilization. No one, not one person on our planet, should have to worry about housing, hunger or health care.”

Lawmakers are planning to hold a vote on the final package in the House and Senate and then send it to President Donald Trump’s desk, all before Christmas.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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