Congress Watch: Confirmations, Medicaid and More

Betsy DeVos, Jeff Sessions and an FY 2018 budget.

February 10, 2017 By AIDS United

This week the Republican majority in Congress continues to grapple with confirming President Trump's nominees, messaging and planning around undoing Obamacare, and slashing Medicaid. While Democrats and the emboldened resistance that sprang up following the election fight to hold Mr. Trump and the GOP accountable for their actions and statements.

This week the Congress confirmed a handful of controversial nominees including Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education and Sen. Jeff Sessions (D-AL) as Attorney General. The DeVos vote passed by one vote, with Vice President Mike Pence breaking a tie after a fierce and contentious nomination process that divided the Senate's Education Committee. The entire Democratic caucus of 48 senators voted against DeVos, as did two Republicans, Lisa Murkowski (AK) and Susan Collins (ME), who said they did not think that DeVos was qualified for the job. Vice President Pence's historic vote marks the first time a Vice President's vote has been needed to confirm a presidential cabinet member.

The Senate also confirmed Sen. Sessions as Attorney General, a position that gives Mr. Sessions control of a nearly $30 billion budget, approximately 120,000 employees, and deep influence over a vast portfolio that includes overseeing the nation's immigration courts, responses to terrorism, enforcement of civil rights laws, and policies on criminal prosecutions ranging from drug traffickers to white-collar criminals. Sessions nomination is deeply controversial because of past accusations of blatant racist behavior. During confirmation debate, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) was silenced using senate procedure, stopping her from reading a letter written by Coretta Scott King during Mr. Sessions confirmation hearing to be a federal judge 30 years prior.

The changing process and invoking technical Senate rules to move the GOP agenda forward galvanized the Democratic base and message. As early as Tuesday evening, the hashtag #LetLizSpeak was trending on Twitter and Sen. Warren's Facebook post of her reading the letter outside the Senate chamber had millions of views potentially creating a wider audience for the next legislative fight. However, in the short-term Republicans have been able to muscle their way forward and confirm their nominees.

Nominations aside, Congress has taken on a large amount of work. They must figure out a path

forward on the Republican health care agenda, grapple with a budget, and fund the government beyond the current continuing resolution. House Speaker Paul Ryan and White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer assert that GOP's plan to repeal and replace the ACA this year still stands, a notion that stands in contrast to President Trump's assertion that the action would take much longer.

Budget and Appropriations

Congress continues a claim that they wish to return to regular order, considering all 12 appropriations bills separately. However, GOP efforts to repeal Obamacare quickly is delaying the creation of a FY 2018 budget. This further complicates an already complicated appropriations process because appropriators won't have clear direction on what budget topline to use until there is an FY 2018 budget resolution. Instead AIDS United expects there will be a fiscal year 2018 continuing resolution. Additionally, Republicans must navigate how to be responsive to the President and fund his likely request for his $12-$14 billion border wall with supplemental appropriations, a request of an additional $12-$20 billion in military funding all the while making good on their promises to cut spending. This is all likely to be done with little formal guidance from the White House. The President originally indicated that the White House would release a "skinny budget" in mid to late February with a more detailed budget to follow in May. However, the dates continue to slip farther away and the President's budget wish list grows.

Health Care

The House Energy and Commerce health subcommittee approved two bills tweaking Medicaid that could be the GOP's first steps at capping the program's spending. One bill would keep lottery jackpot winners off the program and another would revise income rules for married couples when determining long-term care benefits. Ultimately the Republican majority would like to severely cut the Medicaid program's spending, a move that would undermine the health and wellness of millions.

As advocates we know that the critical balance between defense discretionary spending and non-defense discretionary spending that includes health care and HIV programs must be protected. We must closely monitor the appropriations process and not accept budget gimmicks that view spending on things like a border wall as non-defense discretionary funds. We must insist that the health care programs that our communities need to survive are as critical a priority as defense spending.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.