Senators Push Bipartisan Bills to Sustain the Affordable Care Act

Lawmakers hope to save health care from Trump's sabotage—but what are their odds?

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Last week, surrounded by reporters in the Rose Garden of the White House, President Donald Trump formally announced the demise of the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

"It's dead. It's gone. It's no longer — you shouldn't even mention. It's gone," Trump said. "There is no such thing as Obamacare anymore."

Well, it would appear that the rumors of the Affordable Care Act's death have been greatly exaggerated. Despite the calculated sabotage of the ACA by the Trump administration and Congressional Republican leadership, a 4th season of open enrollment for health insurance marketplaces is only days away and a bipartisan compromise to keep cost sharing reduction (CSR) payments meant to subsidize copayments, deductibles and other expenses for people with low incomes flowing for another 2 years has considerable support in the Senate.

Moreover, President Obama's signature health care law is more popular among the American people than ever before. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted this month, 62% of Americans want to see to see the ACA maintained, with a majority of voters from both major parties wanting to see Democrats and Republicans work together to build upon the ACA and improve the nation's health care system. A bipartisan bill introduced last week by Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Patty Murray (D-WA) could serve as a short-term fix for many of issues with the ACA right now and potentially undoing much of the sabotage carried out against the health care law.

The Alexander-Murray Bill would, among other things, restore CSRs for the next 2 years and fund the ACA marketplace advertising and navigator programs that were severely cut by President Trump. It would ensure the protection of the ACA's essential health benefits requirements and continuing to prevent discrimination against people living with pre-existing conditions. A report released this week by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) showed that the legislation would cut the federal deficit by $3.8 billion and would have no demonstrable effect on the number of Americans covered. Unfortunately, the CBO also determined that it was already too late for the bill to have any impact on premiums for the 2018 enrollment season.

With 12 Republican and Democratic Senators from each party signing on to the bill as original co-sponsors and assuming all Democratic Senators remain in favor, Alexander-Murray has at least 60 votes for passage in the Senate, enough to overcome a potential filibuster. However opposition from House GOP leadership and confusing signals from President Trump about whether he supports the bill leaves the legislation with a tough row to hoe ahead.

Meanwhile, as Senators Alexander and Murray were trying to rally support for their bipartisan legislation, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Representative Kevin Brady (R-TX) released their own piece of legislation that would fund cost-sharing reduction payments in exchange for a temporary repeal of the ACA's individual and employer mandates and the inclusion of extreme anti-abortion provisions. The Hatch-Brady bill has no chance of attracting any Democratic support, which likely dooms chance of passage in the Senate. However, proponents of the Alexander-Murray bill worry that the existence of this more conservative option could siphon off support among House Republicans.

AIDS United supports the efforts of Senators Alexander and Murray to pass bipartisan legislation to restore cost sharing reduction payments and enable the Affordable Care Act to work as intended. We are actively advocating in coalition with many health care organizations to encourage Senate leadership to vote on the bill and are working to get all Democrats and moderate Republicans in the House and Senate to publicly support the bill and to pressure the President to clearly support it as well.

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