

Alabama Appleseed Health Reform Update
October 16, 2009

Senate Finance Bill Clears Committee

The big news of the week is that the Senate Finance Committee (SFC), after many months of work and compromise, voted its health reform bill out of committee on Tuesday. Olympia Snowe was the sole Republican member of the committee joining all committee Democrats to vote in favor of the bill which passed by a count of 14-9. Though the committee has labored for much of the year under the watchword of “bipartisanship,” Snowe was the only member of her party on the committee whose “aye” vote was viewed as a possibility as the vote approached. While Senator Snowe was subsequently praised by the White House and SFC Chairman Baucus, she made it clear that her continued support for the bill should not be taken for granted saying “My vote today is my vote today. It doesn’t forecast what my vote will be tomorrow.”

Combining of Committee Bills Underway

On the Senate side, the task now falls to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to combine the newly minted SFC bill with the Senate HELP Committee’s bill, which was successfully voted out of committee in July. Though the SFC bill just cleared committee, Reid and his staff have reportedly been working on the merger of the bills for at least two weeks. Remarkably, given the complexity of the bills, a consolidated bill is expected to emerge within a couple of weeks. A notable difference in the two Senate bills is the HELP committee’s inclusion of a “public option” and the absence of such a measure from the Finance committee. Striking the right balance between the two bills – one that permits successful passage by the full Senate – is a daunting task. However, Reid is noted for his judgment on such matters. As the Associated Press reported earlier this week, “Aides say Reid has a keen sense of what the Senate will pass, and he is focused on finding a solution that can get the 60 votes needed to overcome a

Republican filibuster.” (Alonso-Saldivar, 10/14). Similar efforts are also underway in the House, only with the added complexity of combining three separate committee bills.

Insurance Industry Report Causes Stir

On Sunday of last weekend, just ahead of the SFC vote on its bill, Karen Ignani, president of the America’s Health Insurance Plans, released a report critical of current health reform efforts. In short, the report predicted that health insurance premiums are likely to climb sharply if the measures contained in the SFC bill pass. Many viewed the industry report as an eleventh-hour attempt to scuttle the SFC’s bill and to generally derail reform. Democratic leaders quickly moved to discredit the report pointing out that it only considered selected portions of the reform measures, and commentators questioned whether the release was a strategic blunder. The Christian Science Monitor summed-up the sentiment well:

Has the insurance industry shot itself in the foot? ... [T]he study’s methodology has been criticized as flawed by outside experts. And the salvo seems to have done something President Obama had been unable to accomplish: unite fractious Democrats in support of the legislation (Grier, 10/13).

Others, such as Senators Michael Enzi and Charles Grassley, both Republican SFC members, embraced the report, with Grassley saying that he had been warning that the committee’s bill “will lead to higher premiums.”

What You Can Do to Help Promote Healthcare Reform

As Congress continues to work on the critical issue of healthcare reform, Representatives and Senators are interested in hearing from their constituents. Even if you do not go into detail on the issues involved, it is still important to let your Congressmen know that you support healthcare reform. To find how you can contact your Congressmen, you may visit: <http://www.congressmerge.com/>.