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House, Senate put health reform plans on the table

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Marc Corriveau understands the new administration in Washington, D.C., has a health care plan.

He just doesn't think it's going to come fast enough or do enough to help Michigan residents who can't afford the skyrocketing costs of health care or are, worse, completely uninsured.

That's why Corriveau, the second-term Democrat from Northville who represents the state House's 20th District, is a sponsor of a health care reform package Democrats say would guarantee health care access to all Michigan citizens, prohibit insurance companies from rejecting or jacking up rates on the sick, and expand coverage for Michigan children. The plan would also rein in the skyrocketing cost of health care by creating a catastrophic health care fund to protect the sickest individuals.

"We're mindful of what D.C. is trying to do ... I was of the opinion we needed to move and move quickly," said Corriveau, whose district includes Plymouth, Canton and Northville. "I started to break it down and look at it as a statewide problem."

The House Democrats' plan to guarantee access to health care takes aim at a key element of Michigan's health care crisis. As more and more workers lose their jobs and employer-based health care coverage, many find themselves being rejected by insurance companies because they have an existing medical condition, adding to the state's more than 1.1 million uninsured residents. Michigan leads the nation in unemployment - 12.6 percent in March according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Some businesses decide to drop it (to save money) and people are suddenly without health care," Corriveau said. "

According to Corriveau, the House Democrats' plan will, among other things:

- Guarantee access to health care by requiring insurance companies to cover people who have pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes or cancer.
- Prohibit insurers from raising rates on individuals who become sick.
- Ban unfair market practices like cherry picking the healthiest individuals to cover, which drive up insurance rates and prevent some of the most vulnerable residents from obtaining care.
- Expand the state's MICHild program to help cover every child in Michigan.

"Our plan requires all insurance companies to guarantee health care coverage to Michigan citizens, and ends the outrageous practice of insurance companies refusing to cover the sick or elderly," said House Speaker Andy Dillon (D-Redford Township). "Health care reform is too important to wait for Washington to act - we need to take action here in Michigan to guarantee access to protect each and every Michigan citizen."

Senate Republicans have a plan of their own in committee. Central to the plan, according to Republicans, are its two programs to expand coverage for the uninsured. MI Access covers uninsured patients earning under 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, while MI Coverage protects those earning between 200 and 300 percent of that level.

State Sen. John Pappageorge, (R-Troy), one of the sponsors, said the MI Health package is an innovative approach that provides consumer protections and has the potential to cover half of the more than 1.2 million uninsured people in the state.

“This legislative package will help expand health care coverage to more of Michigan's uninsured people,” said Pappageorge, R-Troy. “The Senate plan also will allow consumers to retain choice while keeping costs down, which is of paramount importance to me.”

MI Health is the result of a series of bipartisan workgroup meetings chaired by Sen. Tom George that led to a four-bill package of reforms.

Among the chief differences, according to Corriveau, are what to do about “cherry picking” (insurance companies offering health insurance only to the young and/or healthy), and the funding source to address uninsured and low-income residents.

“Our package guarantees all carriers must not use health (as an insuring criteria), and thus no one will be rejected because they have diabetes, heart diseases, etc.,” Corriveau said. “The Senate's package has a 1.8-percent tax on all claims paid. This would include all self-insured businesses such as Ford, Chrysler and GM. The hospitals are taxed and Blue Cross Blue Shield is asked to contribute their tax-exempt value.”

Corriveau said he plans to meet with state Sen. Tom George, (R-Kalamazoo), one of the Republican sponsors, to “see if a compromise can be forged.” If not, Corriveau said he'll move the House package to the floor for a vote.

“Too many of our friends and neighbors have become victims of a broken health care system that allows insurance companies to deny coverage for people who are sick at the very time they need coverage the most,” Corriveau said. “Our plan guarantees health care access for anyone who needs it and bans the shameful practice of rejecting the sick and cherry picking the healthy.”

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