

Strange Bedfellows

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Cantwell on health reform: Empower states

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., predicts health care reform will pass out of the Senate this year, with a provision to allow states to negotiate with health insurance providers for affordable coverage.

Back home on Thanksgiving break, Cantwell did a tour Monday at International Community Health Services (ICHS), which saw 16,000 patients last year -- 43 percent of them supported by Washington's Basic Health Plan.

She was playing the dual role of defender and advocate.

With the state's latest projected deficit, the Basic Health Plan is, in Cantwell's words, "on the chopping block."

"It will be eliminated if a new source of funding is not found," Ellie Menzies of the Service Employees International Union, Local 1199, which represents many health care workers, said Monday.

Teresita Batayola, executive director of ICHS, repeatedly told Cantwell she is "very nervous" and "very worried" about the program.

"Basic Health is critical to our facilities," Batayola added.

At the same time, Cantwell has argued in Washington, D.C., that Washington state's program is "a model for the nation" in how to provide health coverage to the working poor while driving down cost.

A member of the Senate Finance Committee, she has succeeded in putting a state-empowering provision into the Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's plan that is the basis for Senate debate.

The Cantwell amendment would establish a nationwide version of this state's Basic Health Plan. It would give states the option of using federal money to negotiate with health insurance providers affordable coverage for low-income families.

States could exercise the option to provide health care coverage to people with incomes 133 to 200 percent of the federal poverty level - up to a family of four earning \$44,000.

Under the Washington program, Cantwell argued, the state has been able to drive down cost and promote efficiencies. Basic Health covers about 79,000 people across the state.

"At every level of health care in Washington, we are implementing reforms that are the envy of the nation," Cantwell told patients and employees of ICHS. "We are just good providers of health care.

Batayola showed Cantwell a variety of services aimed not just at patient care, but prevention.

The senator poked her head into facilities that provide counseling to women on breast feeding and nutritional services, and that set up dental care plans for patients who have allowed their teeth to deteriorate.

"We help not just with chronic conditions and sub-emergency care," she told Cantwell. "We try to get (patients) on a preventive program."

A month ago, Cantwell listed the odds at 50-50 that Reid would even succeed in getting a health care plan onto the Senate floor for debate. He did, Saturday night, on a party line 60-39 vote. (Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, was absent.)

"Harry Reid knows how to count votes and is a master of the legislative procedure," Cantwell said.

On tricky issues, Cantwell was terse.

As to restrictive abortion language included in a House-passed health reform bill, "I think we are going to correct the issue," Cantwell said. She pledged to work for a public plan that competes with private insurers.

Will health reform pass this year?

"Yes," Cantwell replied.

Posted by [Joel Connelly](#) at November 24, 2009 9:30 a.m.

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