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## Advocates for Alabama groups look to U.S. Senate to change health care bill

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Strange  
The Associated Press



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MONTGOMERY — Advocates for the state's low-income residents, seniors and those with pre-existing conditions are looking to the U.S. Senate to change the House's bill to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

"We're encouraged about anything that's going to push back on this dangerous House bill," Jim Carnes, policy director for Alabama Arise, said this week about comments from senators suggesting significant changes would be made to the bill that passed the House last week.

Concerns about the American Health Care Act include cuts to Medicaid and potential costs for people with pre-existing conditions and Alabamians over 50.

Business groups, however, support repealing the ACA.

"Mandates are not free, and Obamacare has proven it time and again," William Canary, president of the Alabama Business Council, said this week. "Under Obamacare, health care options have diminished while premiums and deductibles have skyrocketed.

"The (American Health Care Act) would repeal some of the most harmful provisions of Obamacare, including the employer mandate tax, the health insurance tax, the medical device tax, and the tax on prescription medications ... ."

### Medicaid

The proposed federal cut to Medicaid is \$880 billion over 10 years, impacting states that expanded their programs under the Affordable Care Act and those that did not, including Alabama.

"The Medicaid cuts would be extremely harmful to Alabama because our Medicaid is among the, if not the, most minimal in the country," Carnes said. "There is no cut we could make in Alabama that would not be harmful to people."

Medicaid serves about 1 million low-income Alabamians, about half of them children.

The new act also says the federal government, which now picks up most of Medicaid's costs, would give states either a set amount for each Medicaid recipient or a fixed amount in a block grant. In recent years, state officials have lobbied for block grants that would give them more control over the program, including enrollment decisions.

### **Waivers**

States could apply for waivers that would allow insurance companies to take three steps regarding people buying plans on individual markets, National Public Radio reported this week:

- Charge older people more than five times what they charge young people for the same policy;
- Eliminate required coverage, including maternity care, mental health and prescription drugs, that were required under the Affordable Care Act;
- Charge more for or deny coverage to people who have pre-existing health conditions, such as cancer, diabetes or arthritis. High-risk pools would have to be set up for people with pre-existing conditions.

The Kaiser Family Foundation says 33 percent of adult, non-elderly Alabamians had a pre-existing condition that could have disqualified them for coverage prior to the Affordable Care Act's passage. Only Mississippi and West Virginia had higher percentages.

"They could decide not to require maternity coverage, emergency room coverage, mental health coverage," Carnes said. "It would allow states to in turn allow insurance companies to charge whatever they want for people with pre-existing conditions," Carnes said.

Koko Mackin, a spokeswoman for the state's largest insurer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, said last week it was too early to comment on the evolving AHCA legislation.

"We do support changes that will help stabilize the individual market and provide Alabamians more attractive health care coverage that meets their needs and budgets," she said.

The waivers also could impact people with employer-based

insurance, NPR reported, because insurers could offer policies that have annual and lifetime benefit limits. That's currently not allowed under the Affordable Care Act.

Jamie Harding, communications director for AARP Alabama, said high-risk pools rarely work.

"What they tend to do is create sort of a second tier of care for people with serious conditions where they have waiting lists, lesser care," Harding said.

AARP also has serious concerns about insurers' ability to charge those over age 50 more for their policies.

"These are folks who are more likely to have pre-existing conditions and could be priced out of the insurance market," she said.

Eileen Jones, a spokeswoman for Gov. Kay Ivey, said the governor hasn't been fully briefed on what the House passed and it was too soon to comment on what it might mean for Alabama.

Alabama's newest U.S. senator, Luther Strange, who is running for election this year, said this week the Senate is not in a rush to vote on the bill and a lot could change in it.

"In Alabama, we have one of the largest populations of people who depend on Medicaid, who are approaching Medicare age, and who have pre-existing conditions," Strange said in a statement this week. "I am committed to ensuring that these folks are not trapped in Obamacare's spiral of increasing premiums, deductibles and narrow provider networks. The inclusion of high-risk pools and premium tax credits are a start, and we will work to make sure that those components are funded at the necessary level."

The House bill does away with the Obamacare tax penalty for failing to have health coverage. If someone has a lapse in coverage of more than 63 days, insurers can charge people a 30 percent penalty for one year.

All of Alabama's Republican House members supported the bill.

"The (American Health Care Act) repeals roughly 20 Obamacare taxes that have hurt job creators and cut take-home pay," Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Huntsville, said in a statement after the House approved the bill. "The AHCA repeals the Obamacare individual and employer mandate penalties that undermine freedom of choice and liberty."

David Spillers, chief executive officer of Huntsville Hospital Health System, which includes Decatur Morgan Hospital, Athens-Limestone Hospital and Lawrence Medical Center, said Monday there is a lack of clarity in the House plan about who is not going to have to buy insurance. From a hospital standpoint, the more people who are insured, the better.

“(The uninsured) are still going to show up at the hospital and get care,” he said.

The House approved the measure before a cost analysis was complete. The Congressional Budget Office hasn’t yet completed that review. Review of an earlier bill said 24 million Americans would lose their health coverage.

Spillers also said he’s concerned about older Alabamians being driven out of care if they are charged more for premiums. About pre-existing conditions, Spillers said it’s too soon to know if people will be able to afford the premiums they’ll be quoted.

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