

Amid uncertainties, Alabama House Republicans unveil 2018 agenda

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The Alabama House Republican caucus unveiled a 2018 agenda Thursday that contains bills and resolutions that might allow the Legislature to wrap up work in the early spring.



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But representatives acknowledged there remain unknowns, including the fate of the state's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and what if any actions will come to address [a mental health care network in Alabama prisons](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2017/11/30/adoc-faces-challenges-improving-mental-health-staffing/911810001/) that a federal judge last June called "horrendously inadequate."

House Majority Leader Nathanael Ledbetter, R-Rainsville, said Thursday that leaders in the Legislature were working with Gov. Kay Ivey on a proposed funding solution, though he said it was a work in progress.

"We don't know yet," he said. "Certainly something that's going to be addressed."

Congress missed a Sept. 30 deadline to renew funding for the CHIP program, which covers about 150,000 children in the state of Alabama, through the ALL Kids program and the Alabama Medicaid Agency. ALL Kids says it will have to shut down the program on Feb. 1 if Congress does not renew funding, which would [leave 84,000 children without insurance](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/12/07/84-000-alabama-children-could-lose-insurance-feb-1-without-chip-renewal/932060001/).

The federal government currently picks up the full cost of Alabama's CHIP program, and it's not clear if Congress would continue on that path or revert back to an earlier matching system, which would require state outlays.

Rep. Connie Rowe, R-Jasper, who chaired the House GOP's Platform Committee that developed the proposals, said in an interview she was hopeful Congress would come through.

"The far-reaching impact of the CHIP program funding here in Alabama is that we can't drop that ball," she said. "If that ball gets dropped in Washington, we're going to have to pick it up."

The House GOP agenda includes resolutions on the American flag and a border wall, as well

as bills that “would call for the death penalty or life in prison without parole for the murder of a parent or guardian in the presence of a child” and “dramatically increase penalties for acts of domestic violence against a parent or guardian in the presence of a child.”

The scope of those bills was uncertain Thursday. Legislators had not prefiled the bills as of early Thursday afternoon.

The agenda includes legislation requiring businesses claiming a tax credit for hiring veterans to pay them at least \$14 an hour. Another would give veterans free admission to state parks. The House GOP also says it will “consider” any legislation to deal with the opioid crisis and rural development, though it does not commit to specifics.

Republicans currently hold a 70 to 33 advantage in the Alabama House of Representatives — with two vacancies — and should not have problems passing the bills. A message seeking comment was left Thursday with House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels, D-Huntsville.

The Legislature returns Jan. 9. Legislators often try to wrap up election-year sessions in as little time as they can. Ledbetter said leaders were aiming to finish their business in late March or early April.

“It’s always get the two budgets out, get those out early and try to get a lot of the local bills people need in their districts and carry a light agenda so nothing holds up the process of completing the session in a timely manner,” Ledbetter said.

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