

Westlund, Bates release revised healthcare reform bill

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

This week, Senators Alan Bates and Ben Westlund are releasing the revised version of Senate Bill 329 that creates a blueprint for health care reform in Oregon over the next several years. The bill has been re-worked to include components of former Governor John Kitzhaber's Archimedes plan and the principles of Governor Kulongoski's Oregon Health Policy Commission and the Oregon Business Council proposal.

"No one has a monopoly on good ideas and we pulled from all of the proposals to create a better bill that we can pass this session," said Westlund.

"Health care in Oregon is like two people in a boat rowing in opposite directions, and we're not getting anywhere. Today, we have the opportunity to pull together and get the boat moving forward," said Bates.

"It took us 50 years to get into this mess so no one should expect we can fix it overnight," said Representative Mitch Greenlick, chair of the House Health Care Committee. "Fixing health care is not only necessary, it's possible."

The bill creates the blueprint for reform by establishing the Oregon Health Trust Board, to be made up of seven representatives of citizens, business and labor. The board would develop new ways of delivering health care. The goal is to lower costs, improve quality and provide affordable coverage to every Oregonian. The Trust Board would be charged with taking immediate steps to lower costs and gathering public input to bring a comprehensive plan for reform back to the 2009 legislature.

The legislation creates the Oregon Health Fund to "pool" health dollars to leverage better rates and share the risks of illness and injury. Upon adoption of the plan by the 2009 Legislature, Oregonians could join the pool and receive an Oregon Health Card that provides an affordable essential benefits package through an insurance provider of their choice and can choose their doctors and hospitals.

"Consumer choice is the bedrock of this system and competition helps improve quality," said Senator Westlund.

Unlike a socialized health care system, the legislation calls for "public and private health care partnerships that integrate public involvement and oversight, consumer choice and competition within the private market."

Currently small business group plans can be devastated by one major illness; business seeking to stabilize costs could bring their employees into the pool. Because of the projected number of people who would join the pool, pre-existing conditions could be covered, the exception being residents who have lived in Oregon less than a year, to discourage ill people from other states moving here just for health care.

The bill calls for the Board to develop incentives for healthy lifestyles and focus on primary and preventative care. “We could do a lot to lower our long-term costs by increasing reimbursement rates to providers who help people to stop smoking, lose weight and quit drugs and alcohol,” explained Senator Bates.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, health care costs have risen 73% since 2000. Reducing administrative overhead is one idea for reducing costs by creating uniformity of billing claims forms to help speed up repayment.

Senator Bates is also a family physician. “I have two staff in my small office who work full time on filling out the twenty-six different claims forms we use for the different insurance companies. Those unnecessary costs are currently passed on to the patient. We need a new way of doing things.”

Senators Bates and Westlund have spoken about the proposed reform over two dozen times around the state in the last two months and have more information at www.hopeforahealthyoregon.com. A public hearing on the bill will be held today in Salem at 5:00 p.m.

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