

Panel OKs bill letting Utah opt out of health reform

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Fueled by a deep mistrust of the federal government and Tea Party fervor, a House committee approved a bill Tuesday aimed at enabling Utah to opt out of national health-reform efforts.

Rep. Carl Wimmer, R-Herriman, founder of the legislative Patrick Henry Caucus, which focuses on state sovereignty, said the measures being contemplated by Congress infringe on states' rights and threaten progress Utah has made in trying to reform health coverage.

Wimmer's bill would require the Utah Legislature to pass legislation to enact any piece of health reform passed by Congress.

It buys the state at least a year, Wimmer said, to decide if Utah should amend its constitution "to protect people and their health-care rights."

Wimmer said 30 other states are considering similar legislation, including some trying to amend their state constitutions.

"We need a law on the books quickly," he said.

But Judi Hillman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, called it an "irresponsible and very destructive bill" that could cost the state all of the Medicaid money it receives from the federal government.

"When you lose all of your Medicaid dollars, you will see a complete unraveling of our health care safety net," she said. "We're playing with fire here."

Despite any potential fallout, Wimmer said, it's time for Utah to take a stand.

"Are there consequences to us taking the federal government head-on? I would say, 'Yes there are,'" he added. "We've been facing this forever. We talk a good game but very rarely do we put the rubber to the road and push back."

The House Health and Human Services Committee approved the measure on a 5-1 vote, sending it to the full House.

Mike Lee, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, said the legislation empowers the states to decide who should enact health reform, rather than letting the federal government "commandeer" the Legislature's authority.

"The state is a sovereign. It's not the lapdog of the federal government," Lee said, an attorney, who said he believes such a law would withstand legal challenge.

Originally, Wimmer's bill only required a report from the state agencies enacting federal health reform. He said that was "excruciatingly weak," and it now requires the Legislature to pass a bill to enact any component of federal health reform.

Kim Wirthlin, government relations director for the University of Utah, said the school is concerned that, having to get approval from the Legislature, could keep the U. from getting federal support for programs such as training medical residents.

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