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House votes for Utah to direct health care reform

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) -- Two proposals designed to strengthen Utah's right to reform its own health care system have sailed through the state House -- one that would make a practical change to the state's system and the other largely symbolic.

Lawmakers voted 57-15 to approve House Concurrent Resolution 8 and 62-13 to OK [House Bill 294](#) on Tuesday. House Speaker David Clark is sponsoring both pieces of legislation, now on their way to the Senate.

The Republican from Santa Clara told the House that his resolution simply urges Congress to "get off our backs" and let the state be its own laboratory for health care reform.

House Bill 294 would expand Utah's experimental health exchange pilot program, previously aimed at only small employers. Clark said his bill would give Utahns expanded coverage choices but does not require any insurance carrier to participate. This is the state's chance "to show the federal government that Utah knows what is best for Utah," Clark said.

The Utah Health Exchange, which went online late last year, is a Web-based marketplace where an employee can browse different plans as if buying an airline ticket. The exchange began as a "limited launch" in August for small businesses with two to 50 employees.

The limited launch turned out to have a limited impact. Those who signed up quickly dropped out because of the high cost of premiums quoted on the exchange.

"The cost for the employers that were inside the exchange went up," Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, told The Associated Press.

The UHPP estimates that 84 percent of these originally enrolled employers dumped the exchange, citing high costs, and the exchange now has just 13 employer groups and roughly 400 employees signed up.

Hilman said that while the bill doesn't revolutionize health care reform in Utah, it does a decent job of trying to spread out risk among small businesses inside and outside of the exchange. It would ideally balance the pricey premiums that drove people out in the first place, she said.

Some lawmakers aren't so keen about ramping up the market-based system, saying it favors profit margins, not people.

"The main reason I voted against it is because I believe that health care should be a right," said Rep. Neil Hansen, D-Ogden.

Hansen also balked at the speed of the process, that the bill is being jammed through the Legislature with little room to study an issue with "such a big ramification" for the state.

House Bill 294 also tries to level the playing field by inviting in large employers. Zions Bank will be one of the first of these to participate.

Clark said he knows that any discussion of health care reform is bound to raise more than a few eyebrows.

"I know sometimes the phrase health care reform can strike fear in the hearts of ordinary citizens," Clark said.

But he argues that his plan allows the state to steer the reforms its own way, expand coverage options for Utahns and does not have a mandate that employees have to participate, Clark said.

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