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Utah legislators decry health-care reform

Proponents say all should climb on board to make a better law

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Congressional proposals to reform to the country's mode of health care delivery aren't even off the drawing board, but that didn't stop hours of discussion generally decrying any federal fixes during legislative interim meetings Wednesday at the Capitol.

Several Utah lawmakers claimed massive changes in draft versions are threats not only to American health care but to the American way of life.

Speaking from behind 15 or so copies of a 1,200-page draft reform bill stacked like a cinder block wall, Sen. Chris Buttars told fellow members of the Health and Human Services Interim Committee "if this is any indication of what we're headed for, man, I'm really afraid."

Buttars, who is co-chairman of the committee, said he has read the bill five times, "and it never gets down to showing exactly what the reform I'm buying is and if it's any good." He said the whole idea of national reform efforts is "health care on a cloud" and could be the forerunner to "classic socialism."

Proponents of reform, or at least to do something, said in testimony and in interviews afterward, that picking apart legislation that hasn't even been debated in congressional committees only adds to the sideshow aspect of the reform effort.

Several town hall meetings across the country hosted by members of Congress during the August recess have degenerated into shouting matches and claims that the federal government is trying to ram through several changes that simply turn over another sector of the U.S. economy to the federal government.

"I just want them to tell us in understandable language what needs to be done, why doing it is a good thing," Buttars said. "Right now, I have no idea, but I do know whatever is passed it will be two or three times the size of the stacks sitting in front of us today."

"Let's agree that the bill is too long," said Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project who became the de facto defender of federal reform proposals during the meeting.

She said although she had only read the draft House bill once, but that the size of the issue should be cause for alarm among state lawmakers but a call to add their voice to what should be a joint, state and federal, bipartisan courageous discussion of the health care and how it works in the United States.

"Utah can have an important voice," she said. "What I'm saying is this train is leaving the station. We'd better get on it to make the reforms better around the issues we know will matter most over the long term."

Other groups, including a newly organized physicians group, told lawmakers and repeated at a news conference that the fear factor surrounding health care reform is creating a lot of spin but not much momentum for rational discussion.

Dr. Marcy Zwelling, a Los Alamitos, Calif., internist in town to speak for the Coalition to Protect Patient Rights, said "the whole debate has been turned on its head. It's not about what government does. It's

about what works best for patients," she said afterward, noting that more government mandates and regulations of reform will only add to the cost of care.

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