

## Ex-guv sought transparency

As Health and Human Services secretary, the former Utah governor pushed for the health care system to be easier to navigate.

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**Washington** » Gone are the high-powered meetings with the president and the debates with Congress, the official trips to far-away countries and the power to set national policy.

Mike Leavitt, his four years in charge of the U.S. Health and Human Services Department over, has returned home.

During his term in office, he oversaw the implementation of a new drug benefit for the elderly, the creation of rules to block tainted products from entering the country and procedures to combat a pandemic illness. Leavitt also became the first Cabinet official to blog.

But advocates for the poor and the old, along with representatives of the medical establishment, say Leavitt's true legacy lies in his aggressive push for more transparency in a health care system that, he says, "cannot be understood by a human being of average intelligence and limited patience."

"Mike Leavitt understood years ago that if we are going to get a handle on rising health care costs and the questionable quality of our health care system, you've got to realign all of our incentives so we are paying for value," said Judi Hilman, a low-income advocate with the Utah Health Policy Project.

Leavitt envisions a time when people can look up the costs of a medical procedure and pick a doctor based on national quality standards. He said this "value-driven" system would create a much-needed market dynamic in the medical world.

During the past four years, he has won over many health care activists, not to mention leading Republicans and Democrats.

"Some key elements of his vision of reform are much more widely accepted," said Mark McClellan, a former Medicare chief under Leavitt who is now a fellow at the Brookings Institution.

But those ideas won't make it into practice for years, maybe decades.

While Leavitt is proud of what he has accomplished, he wanted more. He wanted to lead the department during a massive health reform effort, but ran into political realities.

"The debate just wasn't ripe, and it is now," Leavitt said. "I would've liked to have been secretary when it occurred."

Leavitt took over HHS at the start of President Bush's second term, moving over from the Environmental Protection Agency where he served for a year and half. Before that, he was Utah's governor.

The consummate planner, Leavitt brought a cadre of Utah confidants to serve in key positions and a long list of hopes. He released a 5,000-day vision and 500-day goals, hoping to infuse free market influences into government "price fixing" programs.

He oversaw the implementation of the Medicare Part D drug benefit, where people could choose a plan from a variety of private companies. It was the largest change to the government's biggest health care program in decades and while it got off to a rocky start -- Leavitt had trouble helping his own parents sign up -- most now deem it a success. Surveys show that participants like it and costs have dropped.

Under his watch, HHS created a new Web site allowing people to compare hospitals and nursing homes on standard quality measurements. And he helped develop the basic standards that one day will allow doctors to freely exchange medical records online.

Shortly after taking over the department, Leavitt experimented with a blog. Written exclusively by him, the blog gave Leavitt a chance to "crystallize his own thoughts and speak directly to interested citizens. Never before has a Cabinet member tried such a thing.

"I ended up having engaging discussions with a lot of people," he said. "We had times where we were getting 20,000 hits a week."

He often mentioned Utah, writing that he prayed for the miners trapped in Crandall Canyon or heaping praise on University of Utah professor Mario Capecchi's Nobel Prize.

One of his last acts, also drummed up quite a stir on his blog. Leavitt pushed through a regulation that bolsters laws banning hospitals and organizations from punishing health care workers for refusing to perform procedures they morally object to.

The "provider conscious" rule is primarily in place to protect physicians opposed to abortion and it set off a firestorm of criticism from pro-choice activists. Leavitt blogged about the rule three times, receiving thousands of comments.

"I just don't think a person should be required to choose between their conscience and their ability to practice," Leavitt said. But opponents say the rule goes too far and will limit women's access to legal treatments. They have filed a lawsuit seeking to repeal the new regulation.

Leavitt found himself at the center of a number of highly contentious political battles, but as for personal scandals, he escaped Washington relatively unscathed. The exception were a pair of controversies he faced in the summer of 2006.

That June, reports surfaced that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had to charter another plane during an emergency because Leavitt was using the center's jet, as he often did. A month later, reporters jumped on circular payments from his family's foundation, which made charitable donations to a Southern Utah University foundation that were then used to pay students' rent on Leavitt family owned apartments.

"They were difficult, but learning to endure things that feel unfair is part of public service," he said.

Advocates and industry representatives generally liked working with Leavitt. They found him approachable and they respected how he studied issues.

"He is one of the best listeners who has ever been in the Cabinet," said John Rother, AARP executive vice president for policy.

But Rother also said Leavitt failed to do all he could to further electronic health records, leaving businesses to do the heavy lifting and as a result, the nation is still years away from a working system.

"That is one of the biggest shortcomings of his career," he said.

Hilman said Leavitt gave states too much flexibility on Medicaid, the program that serves the poor, resulting in plans that only offer primary or preventative care, leaving people uncovered on serious or "catastrophic" cases.

She called it "a policy that forgets that even low-income working people are human beings and sometimes they get sick."

Leavitt said he at times disagreed with his boss, but he wouldn't elaborate.

"I've been proud to serve this president and I'm grateful for the opportunity he gave me," he said.

Leavitt says he is now entering "the third chapter of my professional life."

The chapter remains a rough draft. He plans to start by sifting through the mountains of official papers and mementos he has collected while in Washington and during his two-and-a-half terms as Utah's governor.

He plans to write some, maybe a book, maybe another blog. He also plans to give some speeches, for each one he will most likely make tens of thousands of dollars.

Leavitt has broken his future into what he calls "three baskets." He wants to keep active in public policy, participate in a health or education charity and get back into business. He may run for office again, but not soon. He won't challenge Utah Sen. Bob Bennett in 2010.

He will keep an apartment in Washington and he expects to play a role in "the renewal of the Republican Party," focusing on health care.

"I think there is a widely held aspiration in our country for every American to have access to insurance," he said. "I think the Republican Party has been slow to acknowledge that."

As President Barack Obama tries his hand at a health care makeover, Leavitt will push his party to develop a proposal where the government would organize the system, create minimum standards and then hand it off to private companies to run.

While still a proponent of state innovation, Leavitt said his views have evolved and with a deepening economic crisis, the nation cannot wait any longer to insure everyone and battle rising health care costs.

"I've come to understand better the respective roles of the federal government and state governments," he said. "This experience can't help but shape you in a lot of different ways."