

Utah gets first chance to weigh in on Obamacare replacement

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SALT LAKE CITY — With the start of the new year, Utah is getting its first chance to weigh in on what should replace the Affordable Care Act. Republicans in Congress sent two letters to governors and state insurance commissioners across the country this month asking for suggestions on how to craft a replacement for President Barack Obama's signature health care law.

The letters were received by Gov. Gary Herbert and Utah Department of Insurance Commissioner Todd Kaiser.

The governor has convened a working group consisting of members of his senior staff team, the Utah Department of Health and Utah Department of Insurance to gather input and recommendations, according to spokeswoman Kirsten Rapple.

The Senate Finance committee, chaired by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, asked Republican governors for input on reforming Medicaid and proposed a small roundtable in January to "begin the important dialogue."

"We are acutely aware that in dismantling the ACA we have a responsibility for ensuring that Medicaid continues to provide quality of care for our nation's most vulnerable citizens," the letter states.

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Hatch is among those leading the effort to undo the health care law, which he once called a "dead drag" on the economy.

House Republicans, in a separate letter, are seeking broad recommendations on health care reform. They invited governors and insurance commissioners "of every state" to come to Washington early next year to discuss their ideas.

At the Utah Legislature's health reform task force meeting Monday, Rep. Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, said state lawmakers should also have been contacted.

"Frankly, I'm disappointed that the legislative branch in Washington did not ask the legislative branches of the states for their input," Dunnigan said.

Cathy Dupont, associate general counsel for the task force, said many state lawmakers may find themselves in similar positions as they did six years ago when the Affordable Care Act was first passed.

At the time, states found themselves "in a bit of a vacuum about what it would look like for the states," she said. "These letters suggest that we may be in that situation again with the new administration."

Tanji Northrup, assistant insurance commissioner at the Utah Insurance Department, said the department is concerned that repealing the individual mandate without making other changes will unbalance the risk pool.

Overall, she said the department would advocate for state flexibility in managing their health insurance markets.

Michael Leavitt, an adviser for President-elect Donald Trump's transition team and former secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, believes Republicans will seek bipartisan cooperation.

The former Utah governor was speaking on [Conversations on Health Care](#), a radio show.

"One of the primary mistakes made in the passage of the Affordable Care Act is that it was done entirely on a partisan basis, and they seem committed to not make that mistake again," Leavitt said.

But so far, only Republicans in Congress have asked states for their input in repealing and replacing Obamacare.

Utah Department of Health deputy director Nate Checketts told state legislators that the letters are a "starting place."

"While this is one of our first opportunities to weigh in as a state on what's going on, I think there will be multiple opportunities and multiple discussions," he said.