



Texas House panel approves health care compact

Published: Tuesday, 7 Jun 2011 | 10:17 AMET

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AUSTIN, Texas - A Texas House panel revived legislation Monday to allow Texas to govern federal health care benefits on its own by joining a multistate agreement challenging federal health care law.

The plan already created in Oklahoma and Georgia would allow Texas to adopt its own health care rules in lieu of federal regulations if Congress approved.

The legislation by Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, was approved by the House during the regular session. States would receive federal health care funding as a block grant and then decide how to structure Medicaid and Medicare programs.

"This is a movement that's afoot," Kolkhorst said.

Kolkhorst said Texas would receive 2010 federal funding health care levels, when federal Medicaid dollars were "flowing at an all-time high."

Opponents argue that if Texas enters the compact, the state gives up its right to increased federal funding for Medicaid and Medicare. They say additional funding is needed to take care of the millions of uninsured Texans.

"Capping the funding doesn't do anything to actually control health care costs," said Anne Dunkelberg, associate director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities. "Our concern is that there is no requirement stated in the legislation that Texas would continue to serve the same population it currently serves."

Kolkhorst said the elderly and the poor can have their voices better heard in Austin than in Washington, D.C.

"This isn't about throwing seniors off of Medicare," she said. "It's about protecting them."

Supporters say states are in a better position to make health care decisions for their citizens and shouldn't be forced to adopt a one-size-fits-all federal plan like President Barack Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

"This is an innovative and very promising way of carving out a certain area of health care for states and starting to establish something that has been very clearly eroding for at least 70 or 80 years, which is proper boundary between state and federal control," said Mario Loyola with the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Though Congress has to grant permission for the agreement to go through, Kolkhorst said presidents sign most compacts. Texas could pull out of the agreement with six months' notice.

With federal health care costs soaring, Kolkhorst wants to give Texas the flexibility to be innovative in how it structures and offers health care benefits to slow the rates down.

"This bill is a look down the road," Kolkhorst said. "The cards are on the table; change is coming our way."

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