

States Reveal Their Choices on Obama's Health Law

WASHINGTON (AP)—After two years of political battles and a Supreme Court case, many if not most states are expected to tell the federal government Friday if they're willing to carry out a key part of President Barack Obama's health care overhaul.

At issue is the creation of new health insurance markets, where millions of middle-class households and small businesses will shop for private coverage. The so-called exchanges will open for business Jan. 1, 2014, and most of their customers will be eligible for government subsidies to help pay premiums. The exchanges will also steer low-income people into expanded Medicaid programs, if states choose to broaden their safety net coverage.

Thursday evening, the Obama administration responded to a request for more time from Republican governors by granting states a month's extension, until Dec. 14.

Ahead of the original deadline, a check by The Associated Press found that 21 states plus the District of Columbia, have already indicated they want to become involved, either by building and running their own exchanges or partnering with Washington. The 16 that want to build their own exchanges, plus the District of Columbia, face a Jan. 1 deadline for the federal government to approve their plans.

This group of 16 includes mainly Democratic-led states such as California and New York, but also some Republican-led ones such as Mississippi and New Mexico.

Five other states have signaled they want to partner with the federal government. Those states would handle consumer issues and oversight of health plans in the exchanges, while the feds do the heavy lifting by enrolling individuals for coverage and determining who's eligible for government assistance.

Among these states are Arkansas and North Carolina.

The number of partnership states could grow significantly, since the Obama administration has given states until next February to decide on that option. As of Thursday, 16 states indicated that they were weighing their options and have not made a final decision.

Among those, Ohio and Tennessee were considering the partnership route. And in Florida, Republican Gov. Rick Scott is now saying he wants to find a way to work with the federal government after years of steadfastly opposing Obama's overhaul.

Finally, 13 states have indicated they will default to the federal government, allowing Washington to set up and run their exchanges. The health care law provided that the feds would run exchanges in states that were not ready or willing to do so. In this group are states whose Re-

publican governors have staunchly opposed the law, including Texas, Louisiana and South Carolina.

Obama's election victory guaranteed the survival of his health care law, which is eventually expected to provide coverage to more than 30 million people through the exchanges and expanded Medicaid programs. It was the final hurdle, after the Supreme Court upheld a legal challenge from 26 states. In the aftermath of the election, some Republican state leaders say it's time to accept the law.

"I don't like it; I would not vote for it; I think it needs to be repealed. But it is the law," said Mississippi Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney, after announcing that his state wants to set up its own exchange. "If you default to the federal government, you forever give the keys to the state's health insurance market to the federal government."

Traditionally, states have regulated the private health insurance market.

But other Republican-led states

say they don't have enough information to make a decision at this point and are clamoring for the Obama administration to release major regulations that have been bottled up for months.

"States are struggling with many unanswered questions and are not able to make comprehensive far-reaching decisions prudently," Govs. Bob McDonnell of Virginia and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana wrote Obama earlier this week. They asked for a meeting with the president, as well as a postponement of the original Nov. 16 deadline.

Some of their main concerns are hidden costs of operating the exchanges and the sheer bureaucratic complexity of the new system. The Obama administration has steadfastly maintained it will not postpone the Jan. 1, 2014, launch date for the law's coverage expansion. Open enrollment for exchange plans will begin even sooner, Oct. 1, 2013.

Policy experts in Washington are noticing the shift.

"I think it's a very practical deci-

sion for states now," said Alan Weil, executive director of the nonpartisan National Academy for State Health Policy. "We are going to have a significant number of states running their own exchanges, a significant number where the federal government is running the exchange and a significant number of partnerships. The bottom line is, we are going to have to figure out how to make all three models work."

Although the public remains divided about the health care law, the idea of states running the new insurance markets is popular, especially with Republicans and political independents. A recent AP poll found that 63 percent of Americans would prefer states to run the exchanges, with 32 percent favoring federal control.

The breakdown among Republicans was 81 percent to 17 percent in favor of state control, while independents lined up 65-28 for states taking the lead. Democrats were almost evenly divided, with a slim majority favoring state control.

Lawmakers to Review Texas Open Records Act

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas lawmakers are considering possible changes to the Texas Public Information Act, including how to reduce frivolous requests and whether or not the act hurts government contractors.

Texas has one of the best open records laws in the country, but Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst asked the Senate Open Government Committee to take a look at possible changes when the Legislature meets next year. Needless to say, changing the law that requires the government to make its records public always makes open government advocates, such as journalists, a little nervous.

Sen. Rodney Ellis, a Houston Democrat, chairs the committee and on Monday it will hear testimony on reducing the number of "burdensome or frivolous" requests, how new technologies are creating public information, how long information should be retained and how the law impacts government contractors.

The touchiest issue will certainly be what to do about so-called burdensome and frivolous requests. The act already allows government agencies to charge requestors for staff time to fulfill long, complicated requests, but state agencies apparently don't think that's enough of a deterrent. Lawmakers will consider charging even more or allowing agencies to reject a request.

How governments produce and store documents, spreadsheets and databases have changed a lot in the last 10 years, and so have the ways journalists have requested that information.

For instance, a journalist may ask for a functioning database from a government agency in digital form. In others states a person may request a digital mirror of an entire disc drive, say from a governor's computer, and the office must turn it over.

In Texas, state officials and agencies often only supply non-searchable scans of paper documents, making it difficult to analyze the information. With agencies creating huge databases subject to a public information request, lawmakers have an opportunity to require government employees to turn over information in its most accessible format. Without that requirement, public information officers can make the information they turn over as difficult as possible to use, violating the spirit of open government.

Lawmakers will study how long government agencies and offices must hold on to public records, such as e-mails. Whenever a public controversy, one of the first things journalists request are the official e-mails of the government workers involved in order to see what was happening behind the scenes.

Texas law requires only elected

officials and top executives to retain their correspondence for a year. Their staff, however, can delete their e-mails after a single week. This opportunity to avoid public scrutiny is obvious and too frequently used.

Another worrying development is whether lawmakers will consider exempting from the law information about the private companies that do business with the state and local government.

When someone requests information about a government contractor, those businesses often worry that some of their financial information or trade secrets will leak out. Oftentimes, the government agency must send a letter to the company asking whether it wants to exercise its right to privacy, something that requires a lawyer's time to review and answer.

Many of these companies would prefer to have key provisions of their contracts and corporate financial information kept secret, something they will certainly lobby for in the next session.

The hearing on Monday is strictly to gather testimony, and so far no lawmakers have introduced a bill to amend the Public Information Act. But the testimony heard on Monday will likely influence what bills may look like when the Legislature returns in January.

Candidates for 2014 Already Getting Busy

By Ross Ramsey
Texas Tribune

Just when your mailbox is clear of attacks and your television is free of fuzzy and unflattering black-and-white images of career politicians, the political pros have already started manufacturing grist for the elections two years from now.

Comptroller Susan Combs, who would just love to be the state's next lieutenant governor, just moved a top aide, David White, from her state office to her campaign.

Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson just hired Chris Elam, a political operative, away from the Republican Party of Texas to run his campaign — an announcement made under the letterhead "Patterson for Lieutenant Governor."

Across Austin, especially in the blocks closest to the state Capitol, it's not hard to find bumper stickers touting Todd Staples, the state's agriculture commissioner, for lieutenant governor.

And here comes George P. Bush, the newest bearer of the family franchise, who has made the necessary filings for a campaign. Associates say he will consider running for one of those emptying statewide offices. But all that is really known is that he filed the paperwork to run for something. Could be anything from governor to a spot on a backwater appellate court.

Don't forget the current occupant of that corner office on the second floor of the Capitol's east wing. Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst isn't acting like a retiree. He lost an expensive United States Senate race in July, but he has jumped back into his work, naming Senate committee

chairs months early and announcing his support for legislation — like a bill that would require welfare applicants to take drug tests — and he looks like a guy who wants to keep his job.

It's 2012 to most of us, but it's 2014 to them.

The speculation game is nothing new and is based partly on the state's recent history of electing Republicans in statewide elections, and partly on the fact that the hierarchy in statewide offices has been relatively static. Voters might not be ready to talk about it, but the state's aspiring political talents are eager to move up — more so than usual because they have not had open seats to grab.

Now, maybe — maybe — they will.

Musical chairs is already under way — Republicans started talking among themselves about presidential nominations before Mitt Romney had conceded. But in Texas, the music is still playing: someone in that pack of wannabes could back away from the lieutenant governor's seat and set his or her sights on something else — maybe even re-election or retirement. And the queues are filling up for the contestants' current seats, which could force them to make decisions before they normally might do so.

Patterson's run sets up a run by Bush (his father, former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, told potential supporters in a fund-raising letter that his son was aiming at the land office). At least three Texans have expressed interest in the comptroller job, should Combs move on.

They haven't hired yet. Heck, Gov. Rick Perry, whose job will be on the ballot in 2014, hasn't filled

out the political staff he disbanded after his presidential run. Dewhurst's plans aren't clear. Neither are Attorney General Greg Abbott's, who has quietly expressed interest in running for governor. To this point, he and Perry have been close allies — their lists of big donors are close to identical. No signs of a breakup there, but ambition can be a catalyst. Again, no motion there.

The 2013 legislative session could clarify some of this, both in terms of the issues that rise and fall, and because Perry and Abbott — and after them, the others — have said they'll make their plans public in June, when the session is over.

Statewide officials can't raise money during a legislative session, or for the month that precedes one. June will come without any new sign of financial strength, because none of them will have done anything (the restriction doesn't apply to non-officeholders like Bush). The early moves to staff campaigns could help them raise money during the remaining weeks before the blackout, however. Their efforts on the campaign finance front will be reported to regulators in January, just as the session gets under way.

Texans will get a good peek at some 2014 prospects in June, when Perry and Abbott and the others announce their intentions. But those are just announcements — the campaigns are already working.

This article originally appeared in The Texas Tribune at <http://trib.it/TIIVrE>.

Gaines County Sporting Events

November 29

Seminole Varsity Indian Basketball @ Andrews Tournament
Seminole JV Indian Basketball @ Frenship Tournament
Seminole Freshmen Indian Basketball @ Denver City Tournament

November 30

Seminole Varsity Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole JV Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole Freshmen Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole Varsity Indian Basketball @ Andrews Tournament
Seminole JV Indian Basketball @ Frenship Tournament
Seminole Freshmen Indian Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Aqua Tribe @ Hobbs Invitational

December 1

Seminole Varsity Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole JV Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole Freshmen Maiden Basketball @ Denver City Tournament
Seminole Varsity Indian Basketball @ Andrews Tournament
Aqua Tribe @ Hobbs Invitational

December 4

Seminole Varsity Maiden Basketball vs. Sundown @ Seminole, 6:30 p.m.
Seminole JV Maiden Basketball vs. Sundown @ Seminole 5:00 p.m.

Seminole Varsity Indian Basketball vs. Frenship @ Seminole 7:30 p.m.
Seminole JV Indian Basketball vs. Frenship @ Seminole, 6:00 p.m.
Seminole Freshman Indian Basketball vs. Frenship @ Seminole, 4:30 p.m.

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