

Cassidy touts health care plan as 'only game left in town'

BY BRYN STOLE

U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy says a sweeping proposal to overhaul health care he's co-sponsoring with two Republican colleagues is "about the only game left in town" to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act.

Cassidy, a physician and Louisiana Republican, said he hopes to push forward the plan - which he's working on with South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham and Nevada Sen. Dean Heller - by the end of September.

The Cassidy-Graham-Heller legislation, which hasn't yet been scored by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, would scrap the law's individual and employer mandates to buy health insurance while largely block-granting Medicaid funding for states.

Speaking at the Baton Rouge Press Club on Monday, Cassidy called Medicaid "a black hole" for government spending - at both the state and federal levels - and blamed the health care program for rising tuition at public universities, infrastructure spending and other needs because Medicaid costs crowd out other priorities.

Medicaid's impact on the state budget is disputed. State officials have described the cost of the Affordable Care Act's expansion as sustainable, citing in part corresponding drops in the number of poor, uninsured patients showing up at hospitals.

Cassidy on Monday said he was referring to the cost of the program as a whole, calling the traditional Medicaid program "a huge problem."

"There is no free lunch," Cassidy said. "At some point, you have less ability to address other needs."

Cassidy has continued to push to repeal and replace the law, also known as "Obamacare," despite the dramatic failure of earlier Republican efforts in the U.S. Senate. The latest attempt, which would've passed a stripped-down bill in a bid to continue negotiations with House Republicans, went down in defeat earlier this month when Republican senators John McCain, Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski joined Democrats in voting against it.

President Donald Trump has blasted Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, over the failure and urged him in a series of

stinging tweets to return to work on the issue. Both Cassidy and Louisiana's other U.S. senator, John Kennedy, voted in favor of each previous repeal bill.

Cassidy said he's been in regular touch with the White House and the administration's health care officials on crafting his plan, meeting "two or three times per week."

Following his address at the Press Club, Cassidy said pressure from Trump is helping drive the continued debate on repealing "Obamacare."

"I think the president is impatient and the president is kind of jamming the agenda a little bit, rightly so," Cassidy said. "He's afraid momentum will dissipate."

A prime component of Cassidy's plan would cap most federal Medicaid funding to states and shift the appropriations to a block grant. The senator said Monday those changes would allow each state flexibility to tailor health care programs as each sees fit while protecting taxpayers from rising costs.

Critics of Cassidy's proposals, though, said that amounts to a substantial cut in the Medicaid funding that would jeopardize care for the elderly, disabled and low-income residents in Louisiana.

Jan Moller, director of the Louisiana Budget Project, which advocates on behalf of low- and moderate-income families in the state, said the cuts in the Cassidy-Graham-Heller bill would leave states scrambling to cover inflating costs.

"This would rip a large and growing hole in our state budget while eliminating all guarantees of assistance for low-income residents," said Moller, whose group has actively opposed other recent Republican proposals to replace the Affordable Care Act.

More than 430,000 Louisiana residents gained health care coverage when the state expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act in 2016, shortly after Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards took office.

Cassidy expressed some optimism Monday that certain provisions in his proposal especially what he termed a "fairness principal" to even-out the federal health care funding going to each state - might win some Democratic support. Louisiana would break roughly even under the proposal, Cassidy said.

He added that he plans to participate in hearings on some "narrowly limited" proposals to shore up the individual health insurance marketplaces.

Moller disputed the idea that the plan being pushed by Cassidy, Graham and Heller might win bipartisan support. "Sen. Cassidy and his colleagues should focus their energy on strengthening the individual marketplaces, rather than wasting precious time on yet another hyper-partisan bill that guts Medicaid, roils the marketplaces and eliminates protections for people with preexisting conditions," Moller said.

Rolling back the Affordable Care Act, the signature legislative achievement of former President Barack Obama, was a key pledge in the campaigns of many House and Senate Republicans, including Cassidy, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in a 2014 run against then-Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu.

The senator said he wasn't certain whether the proposal would gain enough traction to make it out of the Senate - but said he intends to keep pushing for what he views as a responsible, conservative alternative to the Affordable Care Act.

"One thing I will guarantee is that I'll continue to fight to come up with a plan that fulfills President Trump's campaign pledges and returns power to patients, returns power to states and is both fiscally sustainable for the individual as well as for the taxpayers," Cassidy said.