

Biden planning health care task force to combat rising prices

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President Joe Biden's approval ratings on the economy have been dragged down by voters' concerns about the rising cost of living despite the otherwise robust post-pandemic recovery. | Susan Walsh/AP

The White House plans to announce a new federal task force focused on easing health care costs, according to three people with direct knowledge of the matter. The move comes as President Joe Biden seeks new ways to show voters he's cracking down on the so-called corporate greed that he has increasingly blamed for high prices — a message he is expected to highlight during his State of the Union address on Thursday.

Biden's approval ratings on the economy have been dragged down by voters' concerns about the rising cost of living despite the otherwise robust post-pandemic recovery. And a [recent KFF poll](#) shows that 80 percent of voters say it is "very important" for candidates to talk about health care affordability.

Officials from the Justice Department, the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Health and Human Services will be on the task force, focused on enforcement, the people familiar with the plans said. The task force is expected to be announced as soon as Tuesday.

Two of the people said drug pricing and health provider costs will be among the task force's central focus. In January, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra [appointed a chief competition officer](#), a new role tasked with studying competition in a health care market seeing rapid concentration.

The White House declined to comment for this report. FTC and DOJ spokespeople also declined to comment.

The task force's directive on health care costs is also meant to dovetail with a new White House effort to bring more transparency to housing and rental prices — a [stubborn economic sore spot for Biden](#) while inflation eases in other areas — and work to [address the sticker shock](#) people see at the grocery store.

Biden has made competition and antitrust a centerpiece of his domestic economic policy, appointing a pair of aggressive enforcers, Jonathan Kanter and Lina Khan, at the DOJ and FTC. He also issued a wide-ranging executive order early in his term directing federal agencies to focus on the issue and established a "competition council" stacked with Cabinet officials, Khan and other agency heads that meets several times a year.

The next [competition council](#) meeting is Tuesday, two days before the State of Union address.

This week's development follows a health care proposal the administration [unveiled in December](#) aiming to seize the patents of certain medicines developed with taxpayer funds so that the drugs could be sold at a lower cost. The FTC has also recently [sought to invalidate](#) what it says are improperly granted patents that raise prices on basic medicines such as asthma inhalers.

The effort complements Biden's attempts to spotlight legislative accomplishments on capping the price of insulin and compelling Medicare to negotiate drug prices for the first time ever — landmark victories that the White House has portrayed of late as a major blow in the fight to bring down health care costs.

Biden's State of the Union address will see changes until the last moment, but the discussions have also recently included urging lawmakers to pass legislation addressing housing costs and rent, according to the people with knowledge of the matter.

As part of an effort to position Biden as a bulwark against big corporations, the White House has pressed agencies for months to search for additional policies and enforcement opportunities that might boost corporate competition or crack down on "junk fees" in the run-up to the State of the Union, POLITICO [reported at the time](#). In last year's State of the Union, Biden railed against fees imposed by the airlines. The White House is also deciding how Biden will tout his administration's efforts to target rising food costs. Last week, the FTC sued to block the merger between grocery

store giants Kroger and Albertsons, and the DOJ and Agriculture Department have enforcement actions and regulations to address competition in meatpacking. Biden [has embraced](#) the concept of “shrinkflation,” using a Super Bowl message targeting major snack food corporations — as the president framed it, there are now “fewer chips” in your bag, while companies are “still charging you just as much.”

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