

Moderate Republicans Defy House Leaders in Health Subsidy Bid

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A band of House Republicans joined several Democrats on Thursday to support a compromise plan to renew expiring health care subsidies amid fears from some swing-district GOP lawmakers an impending spike in insurance premiums will trigger a public backlash.

The proposal faces an uphill climb as Republican congressional leaders dig in on opposition to renewing tax credits set to expire Dec. 31. More than 20 million Americans covered by Obamacare insurance policies on average will see their premiums more than double as a result.

The plan, co-sponsored by Republican Jen Kiggans of Virginia and Democrat Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey, is backed by a bipartisan group of more than 30 House members, according to a statement from Gottheimer. At least a dozen House Republicans have expressed support for the legislation.

The Republican lawmakers backing the compromise largely represent either competitive districts or areas with especially high portions of residents who obtain insurance through Affordable Care Act exchanges. The subsidies are in the form of tax credits that directly offset Obamacare premiums, lowering consumers' monthly payments.

"There is perhaps no single question that has greater stakes for affordability in America, in the coming year than doing something about the expiration of these tax credits," said Republican Representative Kevin Kiley of California, who supports the legislation.

President Donald Trump remains the biggest wild card in the effort to avert rising health care premiums. Lawmakers say his involvement is likely key to reaching any sort of bipartisan deal. Trump has been critical of extending the tax credits, favoring instead sending payments to patients directly, but has flirted with the idea of renewing them at least temporarily.

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise poured cold water on the legislation co-sponsored by Kiggans.

"I haven't seen her bill, but that's not the direction that we've been focusing on," Scalise said, adding he spoke with Kiggans on Thursday.

The Louisiana Republican said GOP leaders are getting "close" to releasing their own plan but he's not prepared to say it will get a vote before the end of the year.

House Speaker Mike Johnson also said Thursday the plan has always been to have a vote on a health care plan before the end of the year, and he still plans to do so. The legislation, he said, will focus on lowering costs.

The plan Gottheimer and Kiggans unveiled Thursday would renew Obamacare subsidies for one year but place new income restrictions on eligibility for the premium tax credits.

It would also extend the open enrollment period during which Americans can enroll in Obamacare insurance policies until March 19. Advocates are concerned the price spikes consumers currently see for insurance premiums next year will discourage many people from obtaining health coverage before open enrollment ends, which is currently Jan. 15 in most states.

One quarter of current Obamacare enrollees said they would “very likely” go without health insurance next year if their premiums doubled, according to a [poll](#) conducted Nov. 7 to Nov. 15 by the nonpartisan health care research foundation KFF. Absent congressional action, health care premiums on Obamacare exchanges will increase 114% on average, according to KFF.

Gottheimer and Kiggans would have to win over or find a way to bypass Republican party leaders, who oppose continuing Obamacare subsidies and control what legislation comes to a vote in the House.

Republican Representative [Don Bacon](#), who supports the effort, said he hopes it demonstrates to the Senate that there’s a bipartisan interest in the House in extending the subsidies. He added that without certainty that the Senate could pass the bill, he would be reluctant to force a House vote through a discharge petition, which allows rank-and-file members to circumvent leadership to bring legislation to the floor.

Bipartisan negotiations in the Senate have stalled. Senate Democratic leader [Chuck Schumer](#) said he plans to bring to a vote next week legislation to renew Obamacare subsidies for three years with no changes. It was swiftly rejected by Senate GOP leaders and is extremely unlikely to get enough Republican support to clear a 60-vote threshold.

House Democratic leaders also have said they support extending the subsidies without any new limitations, though Gottheimer said party leaders have told him they are open to negotiation with Republicans.