

House Dems Weigh Medicare For All As Wyden Explores Public-Option Alternatives Ahead Of Midterms

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(Inside Health Policy)

House Democrats reportedly are beginning to weigh a broad range of health policy options for a possible agenda if they retake the chamber that includes Medicare For All (M4A), coming as Senate Finance ranking Democrat Ron Wyden (OR) has been separately laying the groundwork for an option short of M4A that could give all Americans access to a Medicare-type public plan without eliminating private coverage.

A House Democratic health care working group, co-led by Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Terri Sewell (D-AL), recently sent House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) a report compiling health policy proposals from across the caucus, Punchbowl News reported Thursday (Sept. 17).

Medicare for All is among the options, according to Ocasio-Cortez, who revealed that other proposals include adding dental, vision and hearing benefits to Medicare, capping certain out-of-pocket costs and addressing shortages in the health care workforce.

The parallel efforts show that a familiar debate is emerging over how far Democrats should go if they regain power in Washington, with progressives shooting their shot for more ambitious policies as top congressional leaders focus on what they believe to be more traditional and realistic reforms.

Protect Our Care President Brad Woodhouse told *Inside Health Policy* that Democrats at least appear to agree on restoring the enhanced Affordable Care Act premium tax credits, reversing Republicans' Medicaid and ACA cuts and lowering prescription drug prices.

"We are encouraged that the leadership and nearly every member we've spoken to recognizes that there is a health care crisis created by Trump and Republicans that is crushing American families and must be addressed immediately in a Democratic Congress: restoring the ACA tax credits, repealing every cut to health care in HR 1, to Medicaid and the ACA, and lowering prescription drug prices for every American, not just those on Medicare," Woodhouse said.

“Eight million people have lost coverage and many, many million more are paying higher prices for health care and prescription drugs - and addressing these issues immediately is what the American people want and is what Democrats should urgently focus on out of the gate,” he added.

But there's no consensus among Democrats on their longer-term agenda. And even if Democrats do win the House in November, President Donald Trump will remain in office for another two years and Republicans could retain control of the Senate, which will limit what reforms the party could even enact.

Beyond those areas of agreement, Democrats are considering competing approaches to expanding coverage.

Wyden and 16 other Senate Democrats are seeking feedback through an 86-page request for information on how a federal public option could be designed and financed to improve affordability and move the country toward universal coverage. The lawmakers are also asking whether the option could close the coverage gap in states that have not expanded Medicaid, provide continuity for people who move between coverage programs and offer an affordable alternative to employer-sponsored insurance.

Among other ideas, the senators are considering limits or bans on prior authorization in certain circumstances, prompt-payment requirements for large health plans and a tailored private right of action that would allow consumers to take action against insurers that violate coverage requirements. The committee is accepting responses through Oct. 2.

Progressives, meanwhile, are preparing to renew their push for more sweeping change. Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), the lead House sponsor of Medicare for All, told reporters this week that she plans to reintroduce the legislation in the next Congress and press for a committee markup, according to Punchbowl News. -- *Jalen Brown* (jbrown@iwpnews.com), *Amy Lotven* (alotven@iwpnews.com)