

HUFFPOST POLITICS

Governors: Obamacare Is Here To Stay



KEN THOMAS and STEVE PEOPLES: 02/24/2014

WASHINGTON (AP) — The explosive politics of health care have divided the nation, but America's governors, Republicans and Democrats alike, suggest that President Barack Obama's health care overhaul is here to stay.

While governors from Connecticut to Louisiana sparred Sunday over how best to improve the nation's economy, governors of both parties shared a far more pragmatic outlook on the controversial program known as "Obamacare" as millions of their constituents begin to be covered.

"We're just trying to make the best of a bad situation," said Republican Gov. Terry Branstad of Iowa, who called the health care law "unaffordable and unsustainable" yet something he has to implement by law. "We're trying to make it work as best we can for the people of Iowa."

As governors gathered in Washington this weekend, Democrats such as Maryland's Martin O'Malley and Connecticut's Dannel Malloy made pitches to raise the minimum wage, while Republicans such as Louisiana's Bobby Jindal and Indiana's Mike Pence called for more freedom from federal regulations, particularly those related to the health insurance overhaul.

But governors from both parties say a full repeal of the law would be complicated at best, if not impossible, as states move forward with implementation and begin covering millions of people — both by expanding Medicaid rolls for lower-income residents or through state or federal exchanges that offer federal subsidies to those who qualify.

Obama hosted most of the governors for a White House dinner Sunday night, calling for collaboration on the economy, education, climate change and health care in what he hopes will be "a year of action."

Republican opposition to the health care law is the centerpiece of the GOP's political strategy ahead of the midterm elections. And to be sure, not every GOP leader embraced the inevitability of the law's implementation.

"I don't think that it's so deeply entrenched that it can't be repealed," Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal said. "But I do think, as we argue for repeal, we have to show folks what you replace it with."

Despite a troubled rollout, nearly 3.3 million people have signed up through Feb. 1 for health care coverage under the law. The White House reported that 1 million people signed up nationwide for private insurance under the law in January alone. It remains unclear whether the administration will reach its unofficial goal of 7 million people by the end of March, but it still expects several million enrollees by then.

A recent Associated Press analysis found that sign-ups in six Republican-led states — Florida, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina and Wisconsin — were on pace to match or exceed figures the states had initially projected.

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder is among several Republicans who expanded his state's Medicaid laws.

"The whole dialogue on the Affordable Care Act is about people fighting, causing gridlock and a mess, instead of working on something important like wellness," Snyder said, adding that he still has "a lot of issues" with the overhaul. "But it is the law, so I'm trying to work in that context."

Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin, who leads the Democratic Governors Association, said governors spent about half of their private lunch session Saturday discussing the health care law and the tone was much different than in past years.

"Before the election, it felt like a cockfight," Shumlin said, describing the debate over the law during the 2012 campaign. "Down there we were talking about ways we could cooperate."

"There's no doubt in my mind that the Republicans have accepted that as millions of people sign up for it and finally get the health care they have been dreaming of for their families, nobody's going to take that away," Shumlin said.

Democrats and Republicans alike complained about major problems with the Medicaid eligibility data that they are receiving from federal exchanges. The 36 states in the federal exchange have noted often incomplete data with the Medicaid information they are receiving.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett, a Republican who is among his party's most vulnerable incumbents in the fall election, said he's working to expand his state's Medicaid program, but the process had been cumbersome and difficult. He said it still remained unclear, from a fiscal standpoint, if the health care law would be functioning in two years.

"There are a lot more unknowns than there are knowns," Corbett said.

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin, a Republican, said many governors still have concerns about the program, but outright repeal would be "complicated."

Republican campaign officials, meanwhile, plan to make the health care law the overwhelming focus of the coming midterm elections.

From coast to coast, conservatives are attacking Democrats who supported the overhaul, seizing on problems with the program's website and news that some Americans were forced to change insurers once the law took effect. The conservative group Americans For Prosperity has spent more than \$20 million on anti-Obamacare television ads in several key states since last August.

While the stakes are high for parties battling over control of the House and Senate, there are also 36 elections for governor, most of them for jobs currently held by Republicans. The coming elections also offer prospective 2016 presidential candidates an opportunity to boost their political standing.

GOP senators like Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida have been vocal critics of the health care law. Cruz mounted a 21-hour Senate speech against Obama's health law and was tied to the partial government shutdown, while Rubio was an early proponent of defunding the health law, although he distanced himself from the shutdown.

New Hampshire Gov. Maggie Hassan, a first-term Democrat up for re-election in November, said her state would soon expand its Medicaid program to cover 50,000 uninsured residents.

"Overall, I'm very disappointed with the early implementation and rollout," she said. "But I think we are making progress."
