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The Push is On

This week Washington has seen a full court press on health care, even as the efforts of the Energy and Commerce Committee are on hold while the White House and Chairman Henry Waxman attempt to deal with the demands of the Blue Dog Democrats, and the efforts of the Senate Finance Committee to reach a bipartisan deal seem to have fallen in a heap.

Last night the President took his case for health care reform without delay directly to the American people in a prime time television media conference.

"If we do not reform health care, your premiums and out-of-pocket costs will continue to skyrocket," Mr. Obama said. "If we do not act, 14,000 Americans will continue to lose their health insurance every single day."

He directly addressed the anxiety many Americans feel about emerging plans to revamp health care and he cast retooling the health-care system as crucial to the nation's economic success. Reform would help rein in the national deficit and rebuild the economy, he argued, in a way that would help middle-class workers, whose wages have stagnated in recent years largely because of spiraling health-care costs.

Meanwhile, Republicans are trying to slow down the legislative effort and trying to mischaracterize it as a costly and ineffective endeavor that would expand government control, take away Americans' existing coverage, ration care, and contribute to run-away government spending.

The Republicans have indicated that they do not plan to counter the Democrat bills with their own alternative, although in the past they have introduced alternative proposals. A close examination of these nearly identical proposals, all based on John McCain's election policy, indicates that Republicans would effectively dismantle the employer-based system by giving all Americans a tax credit to purchase their own health insurance, and that their idea of controlling health care spending is to cap awards for malpractice claims.

So far, issue advertising around health-care reform hasn't erupted into a major spending spree and it has trailed behind lobbying and grassroots efforts. Most of the \$19.7 million advertising outlay to date is by groups such as the American Association of Retired Persons and the pharmaceutical industry which are in favour of reform. This is a minute spend in contrast to the \$127 million spent on lobbying on health in the first three months of 2009.

Between now and the beginning of August, when the Congress leaves for the summer recess, it seems likely that the Energy and Commerce Committee will finally get agreement on a bill. However it is not clear if the bill will then go to the House floor, even though Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the Democrats have the votes. But Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has already declared that the Senate will not attempt to pass health reform legislation before the recess.

So Congressional members must return home until after Labor Day (September 7) to face the concerns of their constituents and make the case about why they are supporting or opposing health care reform. Many are nervous about what awaits them and rightly so, because while delay may create opportunities for the opponents of reform, doing nothing about the current health care crisis is increasingly not an option. Between the first of August and Labor Day almost half a million Americans are going to lose their health insurance coverage.