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Today's News for the National Association of Health Underwriters from Newspapers, TV, Radio and the Journals

Customized Briefing for Kimberly Barry-Curley

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Leading the News

White House Healthcare Bill To Include Republican Ideas.

Almost universally, media coverage of the President's new healthcare reform plan highlights his expected inclusion of provisions backed by Republicans -- a move commentators are casting as a potentially effective strategic decision. In fact, some analysts are describing a clear improvement in the measure's prospects for House passage. On its front page, the [Washington Post](#) (3/3, A1, Montgomery, Murray), for example, reports that "Obama's gesture to include GOP-backed provisions on cutting costs and preventing fraud appeared to strengthen the resolve of congressional Democrats" to use reconciliation and pass the measure, and "on Tuesday, Democratic leaders seemed increasingly confident that they could revive the bill and deliver it to Obama's desk, perhaps before the Easter recess begins March 29." The [Detroit Free Press](#) (3/3, Spangler) notes that in November, a version of healthcare reform passed the House "with only three votes to spare," but the [Wall Street Journal](#) (3/3, Hitt, Meckler, Adamy, subscription required) points out that according to a survey of the Democrats who voted "no" back then, at least six -- including Reps. John Tanner (TN) and John Adler (NJ) -- are now undecided.

[Roll Call](#) (3/3, Pierce, Bendery, subscription required) describes Democrats as "trying to make sure the stars align perfectly for what is likely their only shot at passing an overhaul this year." A "senior Senate Democratic aide" tells Roll Call, "We need to do everything right. ... Things have been plodding ahead, but the final decisions on an exact process, timing and substance still have to be made."

In a largely positive assessment of the President's move, [ABC World News](#) (3/2, story 5, 1:30, Sawyer) reported that "Obama is ready to put forward a new bill that will include some things Republicans have asked for."

The [Christian Science Monitor](#) (3/3, Feldmann) reports that "it's already clear what the endgame looks like: Obama is making a bow toward bipartisanship by incorporating small ideas put forth by Republicans, but is making no major concessions. No Republican in the House or Senate was expected to sign onto the Obama plan on the basis of Tuesday's announcement. But it may help the president in his public relations battle to show Americans he is working across the aisle on his main domestic policy initiative," which "in turn, may make it easier for Democratic leaders to twist arms among their own members."

Similarly, [Politico](#) (3/3, Frates, Brown) reports that "Obama appears to be betting that by including Republican proposals that are rejected out of hand, he can help build a case for a party-line reconciliation strategy," and the [AP](#) (3/3, Babington) refers to "a bit of political sleight of hand," as "virtually no one in Congress or the White House thinks it will procure a single Republican vote." Instead "the move is aimed instead at wavering Democrats, especially in the House. Some of them might find it easier to vote for the healthcare package if they can tell constituents it had bipartisan elements that Republicans should have supported."

In a front-page story, the [New York Times](#) (3/3, A1, Herszenhorn, Pear) reports, "By signaling that he is open to the opposition's ideas, Mr. Obama struck a bipartisan tone even as the White House prepared the ground for Democratic efforts to pass comprehensive legislation on a party-line vote." [Bloomberg News](#) (3/3, Chen) also notes that "by incorporating ideas suggested by Republicans at a

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The advertisement features the logo for CAN Corporate Angel Network, which includes the word "CAN" in a large, stylized font with an arrow pointing right, and "CORPORATE ANGEL NETWORK" in smaller text below it. The background is a dark blue image of a person's hands. The main text reads: "Donate an empty seat on your corporate aircraft to give a cancer patient a lift to life-saving cancer treatment at no cost or inconvenience to you." The phone number "(914) 328.1313" is displayed in yellow at the bottom right.

bipartisan summit last week, the White House is arguing that the drive to enact comprehensive legislation will be a bipartisan effort even if no Republicans vote for the bill."

[USA Today](#) (3/3, Wolf, Fritze), [AFP](#) (3/3), [McClatchy](#) (3/3, Lightman, Talev), the [Washington Times](#) (3/3, Haberkorn), and [The Hill](#) (3/3, Bolton, subscription required) also cover the story.

"Everyday Americans" Seen As Disillusioned By Lack Of Agreement On Healthcare. [USA Today](#) (3/3, Wolf) reports as that as Obama "and Republicans in Congress remain at loggerheads over how to fix the nation's healthcare system," Travis Ulerick "and the six other 'everyday Americans' invited by the White House" to a March 5, 2009 White House summit on healthcare "are disillusioned by the impasse. Many blame what they see as Republicans' intransigence, but also the special deals Obama and Democratic congressional leaders made to win votes."

From NAHU

We know many of you have been extremely active with legislative issues and we want to thank you for your hard work and assure you it is making a difference. We are seeing some inroads on the legislative front and continue to work diligently with Congress to keep things on the right track.

The next few months will be the most intensive of times for our association's government affairs efforts. We have every reason to believe that health system reform legislation will move forward, and we need to preserve the role of agents and brokers and ensure continuance of the private market. It is for these reasons that we have decided to reinstate our Grass Roots Initiative Program. GRIP is a voluntary donation program created some years ago for our legislative expenses at the national level.

We are now soliciting both individual and chapter contributions to GRIP, and would greatly appreciate any additional help as there is still much to be done on the legislative and regulatory front. **Please click [here](#) to make a donation to GRIP today.**

Legislation and Policy

House Committee Asks Insurers To Testify On Preexisting Conditions.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) (3/3, Helfand) reports that the "scope of a congressional investigation into health insurance rate hikes in California expanded Tuesday as" the House Committee on Energy and Commerce's investigations subcommittee summoned the chief executives of WellPoint Inc., UnitedHealth Group, Humana Inc., and Aetna "to testify about medical claims denied for individuals with preexisting conditions." Committee Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) and subcommittee Chairman Bart Stupak (D-MI) "are asking the companies to provide internal emails and documents related to underwriting policies, guidelines and practices for the last five years. They also want the insurers to list their average premiums and average increases."

[Gannett](#) (3/3, Groppe) notes that the "committee plans to hold a hearing on this issue March 23." The [Financial Times](#) (3/3, Kirchgaessner, subscription required) and [Reuters](#) (3/3, Heavey) also cover the story.

Sebelius To Meet With Insurance Executives Thursday. [Dow Jones Newswire](#) (3/3, Brin, subscription required) reports that HHS Secretary Sebelius will meet this Thursday with the chief executives of several health insurers. The National Association of Insurance Commissioners confirmed that the organization's CEO, along with several state insurance commissioners, plan to attend. Representatives of Cigna and WellPoint also will be at the meeting, but Aetna has not decided if someone from the company will attend.

[ABC News](#) (3/3, Tapper) on its "Political Punch" blog, notes that the meeting has been moved from HHS to the White House's Roosevelt Room. While ABC notes that President Obama is not scheduled to attend the meeting, "it would be stunning if the president didn't at least poke his head in and give the insurance executives a piece of his mind about healthcare reform and some of the premium increases taking place across the country."

Obama Accused Of Lacking Confidence In Consumers' Healthcare Spending Choices.

In his [Wall Street Journal](#) (3/3, subscription required) column, Holman W. Jenkins says that during last week's healthcare summit, President Obama criticized the idea of taxing healthcare benefits because it would open the door to increasing the consumer's shares of the costs of treatment. Jenkins says Obama's view assumes that the often better-off consumers who have health insurance would not be able to wisely spend their healthcare dollars.

House Democrats To Introduce Bill Allowing Medicare To Negotiate Drug Prices.

[CongressDaily](#) (3/3, Edney, subscription required) reports that on Wednesday, House Democrats will "tee up the next single-issue health bill." The bill will direct "Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices. Aides said Friday the bill is not expected on the floor this week, but possibly as early as next week."

Iowa Senate Rejects Expansion Of State Health Plan.

The [Des Moines Register](#) (3/2, Leys) reported, "State senators Monday rejected an attempt to offer a basic health plan to more Iowans, but they agreed to let the program pay for care outside of Iowa City and Des Moines." The Senate rejected a proposed expansion of the IowaCare program to increase the income limit for "uninsured adults who earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level" to 300 percent. Instead, the bill will "allow patients to seek routine care at safety-net clinics around the state, and emergency care at their local hospitals." The state aims "to raise \$15 million through a maneuver that would draw more federal money for services by University of Iowa doctors" to cover the cost of "care at the new sites."

Pawlenty, Minnesota Lawmakers Work To Break Impasse On Healthcare Program.

The [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#) (3/3, Wolfe, Kaszuba) reports, "Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Republican legislative leaders said late Tuesday they have produced a plan to break the impasse over providing health insurance for the state's poorest and sickest residents," but they "would not immediately disclose details." The DFL-controlled Legislature had failed to override the governor's veto of "legislation to revamp and continue the program known as General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC)," which covers residents who "earn less than \$7,800 a year." Last year, "Pawlenty acted on his own...to end GMAC and move recipients onto a program with less coverage and higher per-person costs."

Public Health and Private Healthcare Systems

Medicare Said To Cover Only Fraction Of Healthcare Costs For Elderly.

Catherine Rampell writes in the [New York Times](#) (3/3) Economix blog, "While much of the debate over controlling healthcare costs has focused on elderly 'entitlements,' in truth, Medicare covers only a fraction of the cost of elderly Americans' healthcare." She says that "a new study, from the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College, estimates that at age 65, the typical married couple should expect to spend \$197,000 on uninsured healthcare costs over the rest of their lives. This total includes insurance premiums, out-of-pocket costs, and home healthcare costs, but it does not include nursing home care." If the cost of nursing home care were included, "typical lifetime healthcare costs [would] shoot up to \$260,000."

Kentucky House Speaker Demands Details On Passport Health Plan.

The [AP](#) (3/2) reported that on Monday, "Kentucky House Speaker Greg Stumbo (D-Prestonsburg) accused a state agency...of stonewalling lawmakers who are seeking details about a Medicaid managed care program that has been eyed by House budget writers for possible expansion." In a letter to Cabinet for Health and Family Services Secretary Janie Miller, Stumbo demanded "details on whether the Passport Health Plan is cost effective for the state." In a release, Stumbo stated, "For several weeks now, the cabinet has stonewalled on giving the House the information it is entitled to have, but that needs to stop now." The AP noted that the Passport Health Plan currently serves approximately 165,000 members in 16 counties around Louisville.

California Kaiser Permanente Medical Facilities Using EHRs.

The [Oakland Tribune](#) (3/3, Avalos) reports, "Kaiser Permanente said Tuesday that its medical facilities, including all 21 hospitals, are now fully up and running with a lightning-fast, cutting-edge electronic health record system that caps a decade-long project." The EHR "system became fully operational with the installation of the system at hospitals in Vallejo, Richmond and Oakland." Now doctors "and other medical professionals will be able to access a Kaiser member's record through a system of terminals and digital links at the organization's hospitals and 160 medical offices."

Also in the News

Expert Defends FEHBP Cost Control Measures.

In an op-ed in [Roll Call](#) (3/3, subscription required), Walton Francis, author of "Putting Medicare Consumers in Charge: Lessons from the FEHBP," published by the American Enterprise Institute, argues that Federal Employee Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) legislation "rests on the assumption that Blue Cross, Aetna, United, Humana and other insurance firms are grossly incompetent in contracting for drugs." Francis argues that claims "that FEHBP-participating insurance plans overspend on prescription drugs because

the Pharmaceutical Benefits Management firms with which they contract overcharge them" rest on faulty data. In fact, "the FEHBP has outperformed original Medicare in cost control (and many other ways) over five decades," Francis notes.

DC Archbishop Backs Decision To Exclude Same-Sex Spouses From Health Plans.

The [Washington Post](#) (3/3, Boorstein, Wan) reports, "Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl said...that the decision by Catholic Charities to change its health coverage to avoid offering benefits to same-sex spouses of its workers is justifiable under Catholic teaching as long as the employees are paid a just wage." On Tuesday, "Wuerl said...that he was pained by perceptions that the church was threatening to walk away from services for the poor," blaming the DC Council "for not creating legal exemptions for faith-based social service groups." Although "reaction among Catholics...was mixed," Catholics United Executive Director "Chris Korzen...said: 'Here we have an opportunity to make sure human beings have health insurance,'" but "instead of doing everything we can, we're in a sense holding that hostage to culture war issues."

HHS Proposes Health IT Certification Standards.

[CQ HealthBeat](#) (3/3, Reichard, subscription required) reports that HHS proposed a regulation "to certify health information technology that would qualify users for higher Medicare payments." National health IT coordinator David Blumenthal "said the proposal calls for the creation of a temporary certification program before a permanent certification program is established. The permanent program would shift much of the responsibility for testing and certification to private sector organizations, Blumenthal said."

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