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PROMO

GENETIC DISCRIMINATION: House clears measure that would prevent discrimination based on genetic information.

MEDICAID: Battle continues over legislation to place moratorium on Bush Administration's proposed Medicaid regulations.

VETERANS: House panel approves veterans' substance abuse treatment legislation.

INTRO

The House cleared for President Bush's signature legislation would make it illegal for insurers or employers to use information from genetic tests to determine health insurance coverage or employment. In the Senate, debate continues over a package of proposed Medicaid regulations, and in the House, a committee approved legislation aimed at helping veterans with substance abuse problems.

GENETIC DISCRIMINATION

Question 1: The House has cleared for President Bush's signature legislation dealing with genetic discrimination. Could you recap that for us?

Answer: The Senate made minor changes to the bill and the House approved those changes, which sent the bill to the White House, where the president is expected to sign the measure. Under the bill, insurers could not determine the terms of coverage, or the premiums charged for a policy, based on a genetic predisposition toward a particular disease. Employers would also be prohibited from using that information in determining hiring, firing or promotions.

Question 2: What do the bill's sponsors hope the impact of the legislation will be?

Answer: After the House cleared the measure, Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., who first introduced genetic antidiscrimination legislation 13 years ago, said she hoped that by prohibiting the improper use of genetic information, Americans would be encouraged to take advantage of genetic research for treatment and prevention of an array of diseases.

Question 3: Separately, in the Senate, the sponsors of a legislation aimed at increasing the number of Americans covered by health insurance received some good information about their bill. Could you bring us up to date on that?

Answer: An analysis from the Joint Economic Committee and the Congressional Budget Office found that health care overhaul legislation sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-

Ore., would be “budget neutral” once it’s fully implemented and would eventually produce budget surpluses if it became law.

Question 4: What is the significance of that finding?

Answer 4: Increasing health care coverage for the uninsured is a key theme in the presidential campaigns. Both Democratic candidates have produced plans that would expand government and private insurance to cover most of the 47 million Americans who do not now have health insurance. Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive GOP nominee for president, has proposed tax credits for individuals and families to help them afford coverage. One big issue is how to fund an initiative to cover the uninsured, so if Wyden’s plan is officially scored as “budget neutral” when it is fully implemented by 2014 that could be a significant finding as policy makers struggle to increase health care coverage without increasing costs.

MEDICAID

Question 5: When we last spoke, the House had passed by a veto-proof margin legislation to block a series of Medicaid regulations proposed by the Bush Administration. What’s happening in the Senate?

Answer: Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., tried to pass the legislation by voice vote, but Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., objected on the grounds that the regulations could help rein in Medicaid spending. Administration officials have offered to postpone implementation of two of the regulations. The two deal with ending Medicaid payments for graduate medical education and addressing “intergovernmental transfer” payments. While negotiations are ongoing, it’s unclear if this offer is breaking the Senate logjam on the measure.

Question 6: So what’s the next step?

Answer: Democrats may include the legislation to block the Medicaid regulations in legislation to fund the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which is considered a must-pass measure. The strong vote of support for the Medicaid bill in the House signals that the chamber could override a promised veto by President Bush, which no doubt boosts the resolve of Senate Democrats as well as many of the chamber’s Republicans to block all seven of the proposed regulations.

VETERANS

Question 7: A House committee recently approved a measures dealing with veterans and substance abuse treatment. Could you give us the highlights?

Answer: The bill, which was approved by voice vote, would pay for drug screening, detoxification, relapse prevention and counseling for veterans. It would also authorize \$3 million to create a two-year, online pilot program designed to treat substance abuse among veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Question 8: The panel also approved other bills dealing with veterans’ health care issues. What were those proposals?

Answer: One dealt with revising the disability benefits claims processing system to ensure the accurate and timely delivery of compensation to veterans. Another bill would require the secretary of Veterans affairs to reimburse veterans receiving emergency treatment in non-department facilities until they are transferred to VA facilities. Another bill the panel approved would direct the secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide comprehensive health care to children of Vietnam veterans born with spina bifida.