

Key Issues Before Congress in 2004

Question 1: Lawmakers are expected to return next year to a discussion about overhauling Medicaid. Why?

Answer: Medicaid is the second-largest expense in most states, following education. And with costs rising about 9 percent a year, nearly every state in the nation has already either made cuts in payments or services or is seriously contemplating doing so. The issue is also expected to get more attention because the \$10 billion of extra Medicaid funds that Congress passed this year will expire on June 30, 2004.

Question 2: Will there be any more action on Medicare?

Answer: Democrats have already proposed legislation that would significantly alter sections of the bill, such a provision that would have the Medicare program compete on price with private insurers starting in 2010. There will also be scrutiny of the bill's prescription drug card, which proponents say will help seniors save on drug costs until the full benefit goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2006. Some observers predict a "technical corrections" bill that would make further adjustments to the legislation, but one House GOP aide who is familiar with the bill said last week he did not think that such a measure would be necessary. We may also be hearing a lot about permitting the government to negotiate drug prices on behalf of all Medicare beneficiaries, which is now prohibited in the bill.

Question 3: What about the uninsured? Will Congress make progress on that?

Answer: There will be discussion, certainly, especially since the number of uninsured Americans is on the rise. The Bush Administration is likely to renew its push for tax credits that would help the uninsured purchase health coverage, while liberals are likely to push for expanding Medicaid and other federal health programs to help cover the uninsured. The biggest question before Congress and the President here is how much money they'll be willing to spend on the problem?

Question 4: President Bush has said he wants Congress to revisit the medical malpractice issue. Will that happen?

Answer: I think it will because medical malpractice insurance premiums are continuing to rise. There has been some discussion about taking the larger bill and breaking out smaller pieces for discussion and debate, such as a medical malpractice bill that focuses just on obstetrician and gynecologists. That strategy would force opponents to vote several times against the issue, rather than just once against one sweeping bill. The same objections to capping judgment awards and legal fees remain, however, which could stall such efforts again in the Senate.