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HEADLINE: Critic of Obama talks with Pryor on care initiative

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BODY:

A conservative group opposing President Barack Obama's health care initiative told a small audience at the state Capitol on Wednesday that states like Massachusetts and Oregon that have tried to cover the uninsured have failed dismally.

In the midst of the meeting, the group's chairman, Rick Scott, had an impromptu meeting with U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., who said later he thought the free-market ideas offered by the group "oversimplified" the problem.

Scott is chairman of Conservatives for Patients' Rights, which has spent about \$5 million in advertising against Obama's plan. He was chief executive officer of Columbia/HCA, a for-profit hospital chain, before resigning in 1997 amid a fraud investigation that by 2003 resulted in the company paying \$1.7 billion in fines and penalties to the federal government.

Scott told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette on Wednesday that his past shouldn't affect his current message that Obama's version of health care reform will hurt the country.

"Basically, people who don't want to learn the facts attack the messenger," Scott said. He said "no one ever accused me personally of any wrongdoing." As for how much of the fraud occurred under his watch, Scott said, "Who knows?" The panel included thinktank experts, academics and consultants who said that lessons can be learned from staterun health care programs in Massachusetts, Oregon, Maine, and Tennessee.

All those states have had to reduce services after costs strained state budgets, the panel members said.

But because states have to balance their budgets and can't run deficits like the federal government can, the analogy isn't exact, said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute, a conservative think tank.

Instead of cutting benefits like many states have had to do, Tanner said, the federal government could be saddled with ballooning deficits.

"It's a trade off [of bad options]," he said outside the meeting.

Pryor said recent town hall meetings in Northwest Arkansas went smoothly and that attendees behaved with decorum.

"It was great. I really had a good time," Pryor said.

He said he isn't "philosophically opposed" to a public option - or government-run health care - but doesn't think there are enough votes to get it passed in the Senate.

He'd like to see more emphasis on preventive care and "incentivize" people to take better care of themselves.

The free market "in my experience" hasn't adequately dealt with the health care needs of a poor, rural state with a large elderly population, Pryor said.

State Rep. Ed Garner, R-Maumelle, and former State Rep. Jeremy Hutchinson of Little Rock, also a Republican who now is running for the state Senate, said they were joining the Campaign for Responsible Health Reform, an effort funded by the U.S Chamber of Commerce to present alternatives to the Obama plan.

Hutchinson said Obama's plan would increase the national debt to unsustainable amounts. Garner said to do nothing would be "fiscal suicide" but that private insurance with portability and allowing insurers to compete across state lines would be better options.

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