

The Post and Courier

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Sanford and Duncan remain undecided as GOP leaders, Trump try to salvage health care bill ahead of vote

Emma Dumain

March 22, 2017

Republican leaders and President Donald Trump worked through the day Wednesday and into the night to stem the tide of dissent against their bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, even while the planned Thursday vote on the House floor appeared in peril.

Among their targets are two South Carolina Republicans: U.S. Reps. Mark Sanford and Jeff Duncan.

Sanford and Duncan, members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, are strongly inclined to vote against the bill without major changes. Out of roughly 40 Freedom Caucus members, more than 25 have said they won't support a measure that doesn't go far enough in dismantling Obamacare.

Twenty-five defections alone would make passage of the health care bill untenable for GOP leadership, which can only afford to lose 22 members. Meanwhile, leaders were contending with a handful of moderate holdouts reluctant to support the bill after the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office reported premiums would spike and millions would lose insurance.

Lawmakers from the far-right and center aisles of the Republican Conference filtered in and out of meetings throughout Wednesday on Capitol Hill and at the White House.

Sanford and Duncan were summoned with other members of the Freedom Caucus to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. to meet with Trump, chief of staff Reince Priebus, Vice President Mike Pence, chief strategist Steve Bannon, counselor Kellyanne Conway, Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price and budget chief Mick Mulvaney.

Mulvaney was, until recently, a member of the South Carolina congressional delegation and a Freedom Caucus co-founder.

Duncan, who did not immediately comment on the meeting, appeared to be keeping his powder dry, holding out hope that last-minute changes could be negotiated to make the legislation more palatable.

Conservatives like Duncan want to see premiums lowered, which would in turn necessitate repealing Obamacare's "essential health benefits" that, among other things, requires health insurers to cover primary care appointments, maternity care, mental health care and hospitalizations.

As of press time, reports late Wednesday indicated that House GOP leaders were suddenly open to amending the bill to repeal essential health benefits. That development was met with cautious optimism from conservative skeptics that a deal could be reached in time for a Thursday vote.

It could also be a game changer for Sanford, who separately told The Post and Courier the White House officials he met with Wednesday morning did not seem as open to negotiating as they were to reiterating Trump's warning to the full House Republican Conference just the day before: Republicans have to vote for the bill to fulfill their mandate from the American people or face possible political consequences.

Sanford said that sentiment at the Wednesday meeting came largely from Bannon.

"He was very direct on that front," said Sanford, adding that administration participants at the meeting told Freedom Caucus members it was "crunch time."

Pressure builds as vote nears

The pressure on Sanford and Duncan from all sides has been immense. In addition to the White House, Republican leaders are echoing slightly gentler versions of Trump and Bannon's warnings. Sanford and Duncan each have radio ads running in their districts from the American Action Network, an establishment-aligned political action committee. Influential anti-abortion groups are prepared to go after members who vote against the bill because of a provision they like that would defund Planned Parenthood.

On the other hand, Sanford and Duncan are being urged to oppose the bill by the standard bearers of conservative politics, notably the Heritage Foundation, which until this point has been a very loud cheerleader of the Trump administration and closely assisted in the transition efforts. The think tank's president is former U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C.

Democrats are also adding to an interesting dynamic. On Wednesday morning, the South Carolina Democratic Party sent an email urging supporters to call Sanford and Duncan to encourage them to vote against the measure.

"While their concerns with the bill are different from ours, voting 'no' counts the same regardless of the reasons," the SCDP email reads. "And if Sanford and Duncan hear that their constituents of all political stripes are opposed to the bill, they will be more likely to vote no."

And then there are factions inside the state to consider.

New local estimates published by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation show older customers with low incomes would fare worst under the pending health care bill. For example, 60-year-old Charleston County patients who earn \$20,000 and rely on Obamacare for health insurance would face a steep annual hike — higher than \$10,000 — if the bill in its current form becomes law.

"We're very, very, very concerned about going backwards on health care," she said.

Final countdown

On Wednesday night, as Republican leaders appeared to be narrowing in on a compromise on essential health benefits to woo conservatives, moderates were the ones whose votes might be more on the fence.

Still, after a day packed with meetings — with Pence separately, members of leadership, fellow lawmakers, the Freedom Caucus, the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute and constituents — Sanford said he was still on call for more sit-downs going forward.

"I continue to deliberate on this thing," Sanford, who might have to return to the White House with the Freedom Caucus on Thursday, said wearily.

Elsewhere, U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, the only Democrat in the S.C. congressional delegation, was part of the minority party's major public relations push to thwart the bill on Wednesday.

As the House Majority Whip when the Affordable Care Act passed in 2010 — meaning he was responsible for counting the votes — Clyburn was also watching the Republican power struggle with some interest.

He said he couldn't predict how the vote would go on Thursday, assuming it goes on as planned.

"One thing I know about being a whip, it doesn't mean if you don't have it now, you won't have it later," Clyburn told The Post and Courier. "Working with the Senate, I wouldn't bet against them having the votes."