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Melissa Suran/MNS

About 10,000 attendees were at a health care rally on Capitol Hill on Thursday

Obama sick of U.S. health care system – but will he cough up a reform?

by MELISSA SURAN

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WASHINGTON – He said it before and he said it again – President Barack Obama vowed once more to take a stance on health care reform. While it's a great idea in theory, some people wonder if the president is all talk and no show.

During a town hall meeting last week, Obama said that his goal is "to come up with a system that is uniquely American."

More than 160 people gathered into the White House's East Room on Wednesday to question the president on his plans for reform.

The president sounded ready: "Since Harry Truman, we've been talking about how do we provide care that is high-quality, gives people choices," Obama said.

On Thursday morning, about 10,000 people from across the country gathered at Upper Senate Park on Capitol Hill for a health care reform rally. Although many admire Obama's theories for reform, they said it's time for him to stop talking and start taking action.

Jean Lavin, 44, a cable repairwoman from Connecticut, said blanket health care for the entire country should be an immediate goal.

Obama's plan "sounds good, but it needs to be enacted," she said, her eyes glued to the stage in front of her.

It's been six months since Obama was sworn into office and many are eager to see the change he promised as a candidate.

Meanwhile, other Americans are skeptical about converting to a new health care system.

"People are concerned," Obama said. "They know that they're living with the devil, but the devil they know they think may be better than the devil they don't."

Flaws in the plan?

Some people are more than concerned. Dr. Michael Cannon and Dr. Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, believe Obama is downright wrong.

Tanner said many problems in health care stem from the tax policy, so Obama implementing a system similar to what many countries in Europe use is not going to help.

"It's a system where you have a little private insurance plan for the wealthy and everyone else is dumped into a government run program," Tanner said during a discussion at the Rayburn building on Capitol Hill on Friday. "It hardly seems American."

Obama tried to relieve the fears of citizens who are satisfied with the current system. He promised that if you are content with your plan or doctor, you can keep doing what you do now. If you can't afford health care, however, the government will finance a plan for you.

"The problem is, 10 years from now, you're not going to be happy because it's going to cost twice as much or three times as much as it does right now," Obama said, mentioning that out-of-pocket expenses have already shot up 62 percent.

Cannon said the cost of health care reform will probably be much higher than whatever Congress predicts.

"You can go back to Medicare in 1990," Cannon said. "They said it would cost \$9 billion – it cost \$67 billion. They missed that one a little bit."

Cannon's solution? Implement what he calls a large health savings account – a tax-free account that Americans could use to purchase medical care or health insurance with tax-free dollars.

"If you tie a tax break to health insurance then you are basically saying that the uninsurable won't get a tax break," Cannon said.

Obama seeks to allay fears

According to the administration, the new reform must incorporate a system in which people still have choices. If there are more choices, then the competition will lower their costs

Obama mentioned that a third of health care costs are unnecessary, as much of the money is used for paperwork. Additionally, doctors and hospitals are continually rewarded for performing unnecessary procedures, which increases their income.

“We want doctors and medical experts to be making decisions that all too often right now are driven by skewed policies,” Obama said. “That’s the reason we need reform now.”

Lavin said she agrees with Obama. She believes too many people are rushed in and out of doctors’ offices too quickly and as a result, there are many misdiagnoses.

“I think that doctors are finding an easy way out by referrals or quarterly tests instead of taking the time to talk to the patient and find the specifics,” Lavin said as she effortlessly held up a large sign that read, “HEALTH CARE FOR AMERICA NOW!”.

Jacki Schechner, the communication director for the advocacy group Health Care for America NOW!, said her foundation, which organized the rally, is completely behind Obama.

“We knew this was the opportunity we were going to have to win health care reform,” she said loudly as the crowd behind her cheered. “We knew that over the summer we would have to bring the voices of America to D.C. to speak louder than the lobbyists.”

Schechner said the rally was planned at the beginning of the year long before Obama made the push for reform.

“We absolutely need this rally at this time,” Schechner said. “In fact, it’s the most important time because while members of Congress are considering legislation, we want them to remember what they’re fighting for.”

Despite the urgency to fix the health care system, some people fear that implementing a universal system will drive the nation into a greater deficit than it’s already in.

“I think it’s important that whatever we do we’re going to phase it in,” Obama said. “It’s not going to happen overnight.”

Pressure for fast action

While Obama says people have to be patient, some Americans believe they can’t wait any longer.

“Unfortunately, it’s too late for a lot of people,” Lavin said.

Ginny Timmons, 66, who traveled 10 hours from New Hampshire, said she is hoping Obama will implement a system similar to Medicare, where no one would be refused coverage.

“I have friends who have been withheld from insurance and if you cannot get insurance and you’re older, it is very scary,” said Timmons, who doesn’t believe reform will occur this year.

Timmons recalled when she had to get her gallbladder removed a few years ago, the basic coverage would only pay \$5,000, which was far less than what the procedure cost.

“That would allow me to go through the door and get what, two lab tests,” Timmons said.

Although many determined Americans like Timmons attended the rally, the national health care crisis also brought a familiar face to the event: “Sopranos” star Edie Falco, who has a new series, “Nurse Jackie,” was one of the main speakers.

“She has good health care now because she’s obviously a very successful actress, but she

remembers very clearly a time when she didn't have health care," Schechner said.

After the rally, members dispersed to various town hall meetings across Washington while others attended more than 300 lobby visits with members of Congress.

"If they're not going to come outside, then we're going to go inside to them," Schechner said.

'We cannot wait one more moment'

Although Obama has a tendency to repeat himself, Schechner said he needs to since reform opponents are constantly repeating their message as well. Since Obama promised health care reform during his campaign, many are hoping he will stick to his guns. Just in case he doesn't, the rally spoke louder than words.

"It's the largest health care lobby day ever," Schechner said. "We cannot wait one more moment."

George Krevet, 61, agrees.

"We are trying to ensure that we bring America kicking and screaming into the 21st century in terms of health care," said Krevet, who came from New Jersey.

Krevet believes the basics of Obama's plan are good, as the president has been encouraging public option, but that doesn't mean it will be implemented into the plan later.

"What we hear from the president is certainly encouraging, although he has refused to rule out signing a bill that does not include a public option, which is to some extent troubling," Krevet said.

Both Cannon and Tanner said in order to come up with the money needed to reform the system, which is expected to be in the trillion dollar range, the government would have to tax the people who need money the most – they also happen to be the people with high health care costs.

"One thing that is not an option [for health care reform] is perfection," Cannon said. "You would never guess [that] by listening to the president."



Melissa Suran/MNS

Jean Lavine, 44, proudly holds a sign displaying her views at a health care rally on Thursday



*Melissa Suran/MNS
Discarded signs from Thursday's health care rally*

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