

OPINION

Pulse of the People:

Protect our earned retiree benefits

Saturday, January 16, 2010

On Christmas Eve the U.S. Senate slid through its own version of the healthcare reform bill. The bill fails to protect the earned post-retirement health care benefits of tens of millions of American retirees like me. Unjustly, this legislation goes a step further by financially penalizing corporations that do the right thing by continuing to provide retiree prescription drug benefits they promised to their former workers.

This process is being done behind closed doors versus going through the conference process, which means retirees will again get left behind. There appears to be an effort to pass healthcare reform regardless of its impact on the public. These secret negotiations should offend everyone, not just retirees.

Aren't my lifelong dedication and wages I contributed over decades in exchange for retirement healthcare coverage worth protecting? There are 18.5 million American retirees in the same boat as me who took less in wages and vacation over decades so employer could sock those funds away to pay for our healthcare benefits in retirement. If the Senate healthcare reform bill is mandating that it be stripped from us, we deserve answers now from our Senators.

The Senate's health reform bill (H.R. 3590 As Amended) lacks provisions of the original House of Representative's bill (H.R. 3962) which includes key protections contained within another vital bill, The Emergency Retiree Health Benefits Protection Act (H.R. 1322). H.R. 1322 prohibits employers from making post-retirement cuts or eliminating earned health benefits of people after they retired.

In the amended Senate legislation, it requires a change in the tax status of payments for retiree health benefits that would negatively impact many companies' earnings statements and encourage them to drop drug benefits for millions of retirees, instead of keeping them in place. Many leading corporations as well as the AFL-CIO have complained loudly about this and say they intend to lobby against the Senate action.

The Senate's anti-retiree and anti-baby boomer legislation encourages, and in some cases will force, corporations to reduce benefits. Ironically those of us who have already earned health benefits by making sacrifices during our working years now have to fight our own officials. It is bewildering how our Senators can do nothing to protect the rights of American retirees who accepted lower wages and took less paid time off to be assured of healthcare coverage in our retirement. None of us are asking for a handout, just a guarantee that the new federal healthcare reform bill treats us fairly and does not cancel the benefits we earned.

Millions of retirees who are too young for Medicare and earn too much for Medicaid rely heavily or in some cases solely on these benefits. If the Senate does not incorporate the House's language into the final bill, there will be a financial crisis for many retirees. This would force millions into the already overburdened government health care system, inadvertently shifting more cost onto the American taxpayers' shoulders. Insertion of H.R. 1322 language would not cost the tax-payers or government a dime. It simply allows companies to live up to financial commitments they made to their retirees. Now is the time to act for the protection of earned retiree healthcare benefits.

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