Health Reform Plan to Be Released in June

BY ALICIA AULT

WASHINGTON — The three committees with jurisdiction over health care in the House of Representatives will make their health reform "framework" public by early June, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) said at a forum sponsored by the policy analysis firm Avalere Health.

Rep. Waxman, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said that his staff, along with the staffs of the Ways and Means and the Education and Labor committees, have been collaborating to create a "proposal that will allow all three to start from a common point."

Once the framework has been developed, House Republicans will be brought into the process, Rep. Waxman said, emphasizing that Democrats will work "very, very closely" with their colleagues across the aisle. After the plan has been released publicly, the three committees will hold hearings to get "viewpoints from stakeholders," he added.

Then the committees will work with the Rules Committee and the House leadership to bring the bill to the House floor, Rep. Waxman said. He predicted passage of a reform bill by the end of July in the House and by the end of the year for both the House and the Senate.

Rep. Waxman was less certain regarding the substance of the legislation. "It must solve the problems of coverage, cost, and quality together," he said, adding, "There's no real way to solve one without dealing with the others."

The bill will build on what's currently in place, including Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance, he said. But he left no doubt where he stood on having a government-supported "public plan" as an option for those who could not buy insurance in the private market.

"This system will work better if there is a public health insurance plan available as an alternative to private health insurance," Rep. Waxman said. But he also said he wanted to ensure that public and private plans would be placed on a "level playing field. We must allow private insurers a fair opportunity to compete."

Rep. Waxman said that he was confident that health reform will succeed in 2009, noting that President Obama has given it a high priority, and that House and Senate leaders, as well almost all other players in the debate, are unified in achieving that goal.

Rep. Waxman said that he sees action by the Energy and Commerce Committee as a significant predictor of how health reform will fare in the Congress overall. Noting that the panel has 59 members, the chairman said that the panel comprises 15% of the House and numerically represents 60% of the Senate. The committee balances urban and rural areas, and conservative and liberal ideologies, he said. "If we can find consensus in the Energy and Commerce Committee," he said, "we'll be pretty close to what we need in the House and Senate." ■

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS