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Sen. Kennedy's committee passes health care bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate health committee has passed legislation to revamp health care, becoming the first congressional committee to act on President Barack Obama's goal of overhauling the system this year.

The Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee voted 13-10 along party lines to pass a \$600-billion measure that would expand coverage to nearly all Americans by requiring individuals get insurance and employers to contribute to the cost. The bill would provide federal aid to families and individuals making less than four times the poverty level, or about \$88,000 for a family of four.

Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, the chairman, wasn't there for the milestone vote. He's being treated for brain cancer.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information. AP's earlier story is below.

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democratic leaders, pledging to meet the president's goal of health care legislation before their August break, are offering a \$1.5 trillion plan that for the first time would make health care a right and a responsibility for all Americans. Left to pick up most of the tab were medical providers, employers and the wealthy.

President Barack Obama has made overhauling health care in the United States the prime domestic objective of his first terms and has pushed the House and Senate aggressively to stick to the pre-vacation timetable. That would let him sign comprehensive legislation in October.

The United States is the only developed nation that does not have a health plan for all its citizens. About 50 million of America's 300 million people are without health insurance.

"We cannot allow this issue to be delayed. We cannot put it off again," Rep. Henry Waxman, a Democrat and the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce committee, said Tuesday. "We, quite frankly, cannot go home for a recess unless the House and the Senate both pass bills to reform and restructure our health care system."

In the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid said he wanted floor debate to begin a week from Monday. With the Senate Finance Committee still struggling to reach consensus, that timetable could slip. Even so, it underscored a renewed sense of urgency.

Obama himself was driving the action, going off-script to push the issue during a speech in the state of Michigan and scheduling a White House statement for Wednesday to reiterate that a bill will get done and focus on the role of nurses in any overhaul.

"There's going to be a major debate over the next three weeks," Obama said in the state of Michigan, deviating from his prepared text on new spending for community colleges. "And don't be fooled by folks trying to scare you saying we can't change the health care system. We have no choice but to change the health care system because right now it's broken for too many Americans."

Obama's political organization is launching a series of 30-second television ads on health care, which will begin airing Wednesday in Washington and on cable TV nationally. A version will run on local stations in eight states to prod senators to back the health care effort. They will run for two weeks.

In the ads, private citizens describe problems they have had with the medical system and say it is time for action. The sponsor is Organizing for America, Obama's campaign organization, which has become part of the national Democratic Party. The group would not disclose the cost.

In a fundraising appeal titled "Hillarycare revisited," the Republican National Committee warned about "Obamacare" and said the government "already runs car companies, banks and mortgage companies. Republicans believe that the last thing the American people want is government telling them when and where — or even whether — they can get medical treatment for their families."

The last time health care legislation came up under former President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, his wife Hillary was put in charge of drafting it.

All involved were mindful of the dwindling days before Congress leaves town. Obama wants legislation through the House and Senate before then to slow rising costs and extend coverage to the uninsured.

Under the House Democrats' plan, the federal government would be responsible for ensuring that every person, regardless of income or the state of their health, has access to an affordable insurance plan. Individuals and employers would have new obligations to get coverage, or face hefty penalties.