

“The Healthy California Act”: Can Universal Healthcare Become Reality?



Amidst all the back-and-forth of “repeal and replace” in Washington, Californians might be

feeling a bit more hope for their healthcare futures than much of the country. And whatever that future ultimately looks like, at this point a proposal on the table at the very least reflects the fact that California lawmakers are serious about finding a way to offer universal insurance for residents.

Democratic Senators Toni Atkins (San Diego) and Ricardo Lara (Bell Gardens) have developed a universal healthcare bill ([Senate Bill 1000](#), “The Healthy California Act”) that would shift the locus of power from insurance companies to state government (not unlike what Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was proposing—“Medicare for all”—on a national scale when he was campaigning for Democratic Presidential Nominee).

Governor Brown: show me the money

However popular the California measure might be in its home state, though, the unavoidable issue of how this healthcare vision would be funded won’t go away.

Perhaps Governor Jerry Brown summed up the crux of the problem most succinctly when he said in an interview last month, “Where do you get the extra money? This is the whole question.”

He’d been in Washington when he made the above statement and had spoken at a rally of congressional Democrats where he had criticized the Republican push to replace the Affordable Care Act with a program that offered less coverage. But when reporters questioned him after the event, his response to a single-payer system for his state was: “I don’t even get it. How do you do that?”

Brown noted that around \$450 billion would be needed to make the universal healthcare dream a reality. (This figure represents nearly a fifth of California’s gross domestic product.) “You take a problem and say I’m going to solve it by something that’s even a bigger problem, which makes no sense,” he said.

The bills authors have only generally given a nod to “broad-based revenue” as a means of funding the program. Beyond that, specifics have not been offered.

Senators more hopeful after initial Republican attempt to yank ACA flops



Senators Atkins and Lara's proposal would blanket the state in healthcare. Indeed, it would cover medical expenses for all residents (including hospitalizations, mental health, dental and vision), without exclusions due to income or immigration status. There would be no co-pays or deductibles. And to be sure insurers don't weaken the state's offerings, insurance companies would not be allowed to provide benefits that overlap with the government's.

While all eyes might be on Washington since the stalled ACA repeal and new promises to get an even more stripped-down healthcare bill passed, here in California there's a vibrant homegrown conversation.

In a statement, Lara said: "With Republicans' failure to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Californians really get what is at stake their healthcare. We have the chance to make universal healthcare a reality now. It's time to talk about how we get to healthcare for all that covers more and costs less."

California nurses rally for universal healthcare

Perhaps unsurprisingly, state nurses are supporting the bill, beyond lip service: the California Nurses Association organized a Washington rally for the measure when it was introduced in February.

"There has been a seismic shift in our political system through grassroots activism," RoseAnn DeMoro, head of the California Nurses Association, said in a statement. "We have an inspired, motivated base that will make its voice heard."

California is not new to witnessing the introduction of single-payer legislation, however. In 2006, the state Legislature was the first in the nation to pass one such measure, though it was vetoed by governor-at-the-time, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Whatever the fate of The Healthy California Act and the challenges in funding that surround it, the sentiment as expressed in the proposal itself—"All residents of this state have the right to health care"—is likely here to stay.

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