

CA Universal Healthcare Bill Clears Senate Health Committee



Despite unanswered questions about how universal healthcare

in California would be funded, the measure is still alive and well.

Following a three-hour hearing (while supporters thronged the Capitol), the Senate Health Committee granted 5-2 approval to [SB 562](#). However, that approval was trailed by lingering questions of how the state would actually pay for what the bill outlines—government-sponsored healthcare for all California residents, regardless of immigration status.

The initiative would slash health insurance companies' business in California, placing the financial burden of all medical expenses squarely on the state (including hospitalizations, nursing home care, mental health services, dental and vision). Within the measure, the only nod to how this comprehensive, universal care would be paid for is via "broad-based revenue," which may be maddeningly oblique to the detail-oriented.

“Financing plan” still notably absent

[Senator Janet Nguyen \(R-Garden Grove\) asked](#), “How can we go forward with this bill without a fiscal analysis, a detailed financing plan?”

One of the measure's co-authors, Senator Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens), assured the committee that an in-depth financial study is forthcoming later this month, prior to the initiative making its appearance before the Appropriations Committee.

Neighbors to the north serve as example-in-action

Lara and two other Democratic senators recently visited Canada, where they met with health officials in Ontario and Quebec to gather information about those provinces' universal healthcare programs. Lara shared his impressions of those meetings in an interview, reporting that the Canadian officials did not try to pretend their system was without its issues (including the complaint that patients needing to visit specialists were often subject to lengthy waits).

The Canadian health officials with whom the senators spoke advised proponents of government-bankrolled universal health coverage in the U.S. to “be very diligent and thoughtful in terms of what you're going to offer — because once you offer it, you can't take it away,” Lara said.

Critics of a single-payer plan have said one of the risks is that it would take the focus off medical research. Lara

reported that that concern was shown to be unfounded when he visited a Canadian cardiac center equipped with modern, innovative technology. “It was refreshing for me to see that ... under a public system that research and state-of-the-art facilities and care can also exist,” Lara noted.

But still... here at home, where’s the money?

Senator Holly J. Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) expressed her support for the bill – while holding fast to her concerns – in this way: “Because I ask questions about how we operationalize the bill, it should not call into question my commitment to healthcare for all.” She said she was not detracting from the concept of a single-payer system, but rather, responsibly exploring “the issue of how we get it done.”

Apart from bemoaning the funding unknowns, the hearing included a discussion of ideas about how universal coverage might be implemented, such as obtaining waivers from the federal government that would allow California to redirect Medi-Cal and Medicare funds to the state program.

“We want to make sure it’s sustainable.”

Mentioning the co-author of the measure, Senator Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), Lara said, “Senator Atkins and I are not just going to do this on a whim. We want to make sure it’s sustainable.”

Among the supporters present, many were sporting the red shirts of the California Nurses Association, a labor group that has thrown its substantial weight behind the bill. The California Labor Federation also applauds the measure, along with consumer groups and “Our Revolution,” a grass-roots organization that sprang up during Bernie Sanders’ campaign for president.

SB 562 has its emphatic opponents as well, first among them, health insurance companies (unsurprising, since they stand to lose billions of dollars if the giant California healthcare market no longer has need for them). The California Chamber of Commerce stands with insurers in opposition to the bill, labeling the measure “a job killer.”

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