

President Obama Defends Health Care Bill in Visit to Portland

President Barack Obama visited Portland last Thursday and defended the recently signed health care reform bill against the claims of critics that it represents a government takeover. Introduced by Karen Mills of Brunswick, Director of the Small Business Administration, the President emphasized the benefits of the bill to small businesses, seniors, and those individuals currently without insurance. Obama told the enthusiastic audience of more than 2000 at the Portland Expo that the new law will soon provide tax credits to small businesses, improve benefits to seniors, and protect individuals from being denied insurance because they are ill or have a chronic disease.

The President took on the critics directly, stating that he hoped the Republicans would campaign on a platform of repeal in November noting that, "my attitude is, go for it. I want these members of Congress to come out of Washington, come to Maine and say 'We're going to take away your tax breaks.'" "Attending the President's speech representing MMA were Richard Evans, M.D., senior AMA delegate, President-elect Jo Linder, M.D., Kellie Miller, and Gordon Smith. Also seen in the audience were Laurel Coleman, M.D. of Manchester, Lisa Letourneau, M.D. of Scarborough, Jeff Aalberg, M.D. from MaineHealth, and Barbara Crowley, M.D. of Maine General Medical Center.

Obama praised Gov. Baldacci and thanked Congresswoman Chellie Pingree and Congressman Mike Michaud for their support of the bill that finally passed. He also thanked Senator Olympia Snowe for contributing to the bill, although she ultimately voted against it. In media interviews on the same day, Senator Snowe said she considered the President a friend and that they had a good relationship in communicating. And while she noted that some of her ideas were incorporated into the bill, she stated, "but not enough of them and then the bill started to take a new direction."

Once Senator Snowe had supported the bill which came out of the Senate Finance Committee, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid took the process behind closed doors and any hope of bi-partisanship was gone. Senator Snowe expressed particular concern about the Medicare payroll tax.

Provisions in the reform law which take effect this year include:

- The ability of state of set up high risk pools to provide coverage to those persons with significant medical conditions and high costs. The law appropriates \$5 billion to be used by the states for this purpose.
- Most of the insurance reforms take effect this year, such as the prohibition on lifetime caps and cancellation provisions. Young adults will be able to stay on their parents policy until age 26.
- Small businesses employing less than 25 individuals will be eligible for tax credits up to 35% of the cost of providing health insurance to its employees. The amount of the credit increases as the number of employees decreases.
- The so-called donut hole for seniors participating in the Medicare drug program will start to shrink immediately, but would not be fully closed until 2020. But in the meantime, seniors in the gap would receive a 50% discount on brand-name drugs. Preventive benefits for seniors will also be improved under Medicare.

Of particular value to Maine are provisions benefiting care in underserved areas, better reimbursement for primary care, and studies of geographic differences in reimbursement across the country. Many of the insurance reforms are already part of Maine law.