

Senate Finance Committee Continues Mark-Up; Spotlight Continues on Maine Senator Olympia Snowe

The following is a brief summary of the week's activities related to health system reform:

The Senate Finance Committee continued to mark-up Chairman Baucus' draft, with more than 500 amendments to be considered last week and this coming week. Most amendments were resolved on a partisan basis, with only Senator Snowe sometimes siding with the Republicans and sometimes agreeing with the Democrats. The Committee hopes to complete its work in the next week which could lead to a full Senate vote by the middle of October.

President Obama spent much of the past week focused on international and economic issues, but on Saturday he resumed his advocacy for comprehensive health system reform, telling the Congressional Black Caucus that there comes a time when "the cup of endurance runs over." In the speech, Obama described his plan as one that would not require people with coverage to change anything but would make health insurance affordable for the millions of people who don't have any.

MMA staff interacted with Senator Snowe's staff on issues ranging from medical liability reform to the individual mandate. Senator Snowe was also encouraged to support an amendment which would narrow the gap in the practice expense of the Medicare payment formula, so that rural states would come closer to the payment rates of urban areas. MMA also is trying to arrange a stakeholder forum with Senator Collins.

MMA President David McDermott, M.D., MPH has submitted an op-ed piece to the Bangor Daily News responding positively to its recently editorial stating that the public would be well advised to pay attention to physicians' views and opinions on health system reform. The op-ed piece emphasized the need for all Americans to have health insurance coverage, and noted the opinion of MMA members as reflected in the survey conducted late last year and reported earlier this year. The notion of a "public option" should still be on the table, as a counterbalance to the for-profit insurance carriers now dominating the Maine market.

MMA EVP Gordon Smith spoke on health system reform to the Portland Rotary Club on Friday, September 25th and emphasized that the various options pending before the Congress should be compared not only with each other but also with the *status quo*. "When comparing the various proposals to the existing system regarding coverage and cost, the *status quo* pales in comparison," Smith noted. "The existing system simply leaves too many persons without any coverage, provides thousands of others with inadequate coverage, and subjects all Americans to escalating costs that are unsustainable." From a physician standpoint, failure to pass a reform bill leaves in place the Medicare payment formula (SGR) that will result in a 40% reduction in Medicare payment rates over the next five years - an outcome that is unacceptable. Without Congressional action, the first reduction of 21.5% will be effective January 1, 2010.

Once again, you can follow the AMA's coverage of the health system reform debate and learn more about the positions espoused by the organization on the web at: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/health-system-reform/index.shtml>.