

POLITICS

Medicare Chief, Congressional Democrats Square Off Over Health Law

Seema Verma testifies that Trump administration has improved ACA's operation, while maintaining it should be invalidated



Seema Verma, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said, 'Premiums are lower, there are more choices.' PHOTO: RON SACHS/ZUMA PRESS

By Stephanie Armour

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Seema Verma, the head of a federal agency that oversees the Affordable Care Act, faced off with Democrats who say the Trump administration is sabotaging the health law, asserting instead that the White House is improving its operation and citing recent signs of stabilization as evidence.

“Premiums are lower, there are more choices,” Ms. Verma, administrator at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said in congressional testimony Wednesday. “When I got into my role, premiums were going up.”

The hearing was a rare opportunity for congressional Democrats who have been eager to publicly question Trump administration health officials on White House efforts to roll back the ACA, part of a messaging battle ahead of the 2020 election.

Democrats, many of whom will seek re-election by promising to preserve the ACA, say the administration has adopted policies it knew would raise health-care costs and leave more people without coverage. They point to work requirements in Medicaid, the end of billions in payments to insurers that drove up premiums, and the Trump administration's backing of a GOP-led lawsuit to strike down the ACA.

“Can you show me one study that shows me it's a good policy?” said Rep. Joe Kennedy III (D., Mass.) of Medicaid work requirements, adding that 18,000 people in Arkansas, which had implemented the mandate, had lost coverage.

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The number of uninsured Americans rose for the first time in a decade, according to September data from the Census Bureau.

Ms. Verma countered that her agency has reduced regulatory burdens, bolstered Medicare and expanded access to lower-cost health plans that give consumers more choice. She pointed to federal data released Tuesday that average rates for the most popular, middle-priced plan will fall 4% in 2020 for a 27-year-old buying health insurance on the federal health law's exchange.

The White House and Ms. Verma say they inherited a troubled law and have taken steps to stabilize it, even though they maintain it still needs to be scrapped. Ms. Verma referred to her agency's approval of programs under the ACA that have allowed some states to reduce premiums as one example.

“That's why this administration is trying to advance efforts to make sure every American has access to affordable coverage,” she said.

Ms. Verma said the Trump administration's support for the lawsuit that would invalidate the ACA wouldn't cause more than 20 million people to lose coverage, because the administration plans to buffer any immediate impact.

“The president has made clear we will have a plan in action,” she told the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on oversight and investigations.

Democrats weren't convinced.

“It sounds like there is some sort of secret plan he doesn’t want to reveal,” said Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone (D., N.J.). “I just think it’s so deceptive to say we’re going to cover everybody and not give us anything.”

The administration has been working on plans should the courts knock down the ACA or large parts of it, according to two people familiar with the discussions.

President Trump has made his approach toward health care part of his 2020 re-election campaign. He gave a speech this month in Florida, a battleground state, where he blasted Medicare for All and said his vision gives patients more choice and more affordable health care.

Most leading Democratic presidential candidates back replacing the ACA with Medicare for All plans. The party’s presidential primary debates have spent little time on the ACA, the lawsuit to overturn it or President Trump’s efforts to curtail the law.

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