

Vote set on plan for care of poor

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Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposed revamp of the way government provides medical services for about a quarter of the state's population should receive its first up or down vote by state legislators this week.

Louisiana House and Senate members of the Health and Welfare committees are scheduled to meet jointly on Thursday morning. They plan to vote on whether to allow Jindal to apply for a waiver from existing federal regulations in order to change the state's \$7 billion Medicaid program for the poor, elderly and disabled.

On Friday, the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget will be asked to allow Jindal to apply for the waiver. Jindal is seeking approval from the federal government to allow Louisiana to service the state's roughly 1 million Medicaid patients through private "managed care networks."

"This is just the first step," said state Rep. Kay Katz, R-Monroe, who chairs the House Health and Welfare Committee. "We're giving them permission to take this to Washington. ... After they negotiate the details up there, they have to come back to us for final approvals."

As Louisiana legislators prepare for the upcoming votes, organizations from across the nation are weighing for and against Jindal's idea.

For instance, James C. Capretta, a former official in the Bush White House, wrote on Dec. 9 in *The National Review* that the coming fight in Louisiana is tied to the Republicans' hope to survive the years that Barack Obama is president. "If nothing else, that should be reason enough for the Bush administration to move with haste and let Jindal get to work," Capretta wrote.

On the other side is a study by researchers with prestigious Georgetown University's Health Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., raising questions about Florida's experience with a similar plan.

"You're going to see all kinds of stuff thrown around and that's typical. But it's because there's a vote coming up," said Alan Levine, secretary of the state Department of Health and Hospitals.

As Jindal's point man on the revamp, Levine can quote as many studies supporting the governor's concept as opponents have condemning it.

Levine said he wants the debate to transcend political rhetoric and stick to health-care issues.

So does state Rep. Michael Jackson, No Party-Baton Rouge. But that is not likely, given the number of well-financed interests that profit from a system providing services to people with little money and less influence, he said.

Plus, health care, which accounts for one-seventh of the American economy, is part of a national debate with solutions that Democrats and Republicans do not share.

“It is going to be a huge political issue,” said Jackson, a member of the House health committee. “What the national government does is going to be very, very important to what eventually happens here.”

Called Louisiana Health First and unveiled on Nov. 14, Jindal proposes, in part, to change the way physicians, hospitals and other health-care providers are paid. Instead of the state paying the providers directly, Jindal wants to restructure the system to pay privately owned, competing networks of providers to care for Medicaid patients.

Jindal and Levine argue the system would give Medicaid patients choice. It would save state government money because patients would be treated earlier for illnesses and would not have to turn first to expensive hospital emergency rooms for treatment. The private networks would develop efficient and innovative ways to provide more services that would keep people healthy, they say.

Opponents say similar programs in other states created more paperwork, higher administrative costs and have not operated long enough to determine success or failure.

State Sen. Willie Mount, D-Lake Charles, said she is repeatedly asked why hurry the vote on the waiver, a question for which she says the yes and no answers are equally compelling.

“It’s not like we’ll see an instant change in health care. It takes time to work out all those details and make sure all the (various interests) can come to some sort of consensus,” said Mount, who chairs the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. “On the other hand we’ve been discussing this for years.”

Levine noted that with a few exceptions, the health of Louisiana’s residents and the performance of its state system scores poorly against national standards.

“Morally, I would ask the question how can you wait?” Levine said. “Are we waiting for the Lord God to come down and create a new system? That’s not how it works. As leaders we have an obligation to put our best plan forward and to advance it.”

State Rep. Fred Mills, D-St. Martinville, said that in talking with his legislative colleagues, the point that resonates is the complexity of the Medicaid system.

“Everybody is concerned that we pull a trigger and it’s the wrong trigger to pull,” Mills said. “I don’t think anyone is torpedoing the plan just because of politics. It is so complicated everybody is trying to say, ‘Look I just got to learn a little bit more. I don’t want to make a wrong decision.’”

“I’m not seeing a lot of emotion to wait,” said state Sen. Dale Erdey, R-Livingston. “But I do have questions concerning about how they plan to administer this new form of networking.”

Erdey said a key for how he will vote Thursday is whether the waiver is binding or if legislators have another chance to review the specific details of Jindal’s proposal.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, a non-profit group, issued a report last week that generally supports parts of the suggested revamp but has questions on other parts, such as whether funding would end up diverted from patient care to administrative costs.

“We’re afraid the Legislature will make a decision quickly,” said David Hood, who formerly held Levine’s job at DHH and is now PAR’s senior health care policy analyst.

“There’s a lot we still don’t know about,” Hood said. “There’s been a big push to get this thing done before the Bush administration leaves office. I’m not sure that it won’t be detrimental to the health care system that we have right now.”

Levine said it is likely the Bush administration would not approve the waiver during the month it has left in office.

But the state legislative vote on the waiver this week is critical, Levine said. “We can’t even start having the dialogue with the Obama administration until they see what we’re proposing,” he said.