



Democrats Say Final Health-Care Bill Will Look Like Senate's

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By Jonathan D. Salant



Dec. 28 (Bloomberg) -- Any health-care legislation that reaches President **Barack Obama's** desk will be close to the version the Senate passed last week, top Democrats said yesterday.

The Senate garnered the minimum 60 votes needed to overcome Republican objections and pass its measure overhauling health care, and any major changes would jeopardize final approval, said Senator **Bob Menendez** of New Jersey, chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee.

"If we are going to have a final law, it will look a lot more like the Senate version than the House version," Menendez said on "Fox News Sunday." "I'm sure there'll be some compromises, but at the end of the day, I would expect that it will look very much like the Senate version."

Menendez's counterpart in the House, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman **Chris Van Hollen** of Maryland, said it is important to hold on to the 60 votes in the Senate.

"We're not going to rubber-stamp the Senate bill," Van Hollen said on Fox. "On the other hand, we recognize the realities in the Senate."

Both versions would require Americans to get insurance or pay a penalty, offer expanded government aid and online purchasing exchanges to help buy policies and impose new rules on insurers, requiring them to accept customers regardless of pre-existing conditions. Both measures would reduce the federal deficit, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Final Bill

White House spokesman **Robert Gibbs** said on NBC's "Meet the Press" yesterday that President Barack Obama would be working with Senate and House leaders to draft a final bill.

"The major parts of health care reform that the president sought to have enacted as a candidate are now very close to happening, and he thinks the commonality between the two proposals overlaps quite a bit," Gibbs said.

Van Hollen and House Majority Whip **Jim Clyburn** of South Carolina, said they would not let House-Senate disputes over abortion, taxes and a public option to compete with private insurers kill the legislation.

Clyburn said on CBS' "Face the Nation" that he could support legislation without the public option, which is in the House version. Some senators who backed the health-care measure, including Connecticut Independent **Joe Lieberman**, said a public option would be a deal-breaker.

'No Consequence'

"We want a public option to do basically three things: create more choice for insurers, create more competition for insurance companies and to contain costs," Clyburn said. "So if we can come up with a process by which these

three things can be done, then I'm all for it. Whether or not we label it a public option is of no consequence."

The two chambers came up with different ways to fund their measures. The House approved a 5.4 percent income surtax on individuals earning more than \$500,000 and couples earning more than \$1 million. The Senate version would place a 40 percent excise tax on the costliest health-insurance policies, and raise the Medicare payroll tax to 2.35 percent from 1.45 percent for individuals earning more than \$200,000 or families making more than \$250,000.

Labor unions, among the Democrats' most loyal supporters, have opposed the tax on high-end health plans. Van Hollen raised the possibility of a higher threshold for the health-plan tax and some tax on higher-earners. "You can see room for a compromise there," he said.

As for abortion, Van Hollen said he expected language "that meets that principle that taxpayer dollars will not go to pay" for the procedure under any health-insurance plan.

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