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Sen. Racine unveils health bill; Goal is universal coverage in Vermont

By DANIEL BARLOW Vermont Press Bureau

MONTPELIER – Sen. Doug Racine unveiled his long-awaited health care reform bill Tuesday, a proposal that would pave a path toward a state-financed system that covers all Vermonters regardless of their income.

Racine, the chairman of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee and a Democratic candidate for governor, said his bill would design three new health care models for the state and have them ready for Vermont's next governor to implement.

The bill, introduced in draft form in his committee Tuesday afternoon, would set up an independent panel of three people to design models for major reform – including possibly setting up a state-run, single-payer health care system.

Racine, a Chittenden Democrat, said health care costs in Vermont are estimated to increase by \$1 billion in the next three years, for a total annual spending of \$5.9 billion by the end of 2012. Small changes won't fix a broken system, he said.

"I don't think we can end this year with doing nothing," Racine said.

Racine's bill would establish what he calls the Vermont Health Care Board, a body of three citizens – none of whom have economic ties to the health care industry – to design three scenarios for the state. Members of the board would be appointed by the governor, the House and the Senate.

The board's criteria for forming these three options include: That the costs of financing the system must be shared equitably; unnecessary costs must be cut while also holding a firm grip on future cost increases; that universal access is ensured for all Vermonters, and the belief that health care is a human right is upheld.

"Vermonters are eager for reform that will make health care more affordable," said Paul Burns, the executive director of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group. "Sen. Racine deserves credit for moving the ball forward and making clear that doing nothing is not an option."

The last provision was met with fanfare by the Vermont Workers Center, a Burlington-based organization advocating for a single-payer health care system. "Health care is a human right" has been the tagline of the group throughout the debate this year and many members – wearing red shirts – filled Racine's committee room Tuesday.

A statement from Racine's campaign noted that the three options created by this board would adhere to the five principles that the Worker's Center said they wanted to see in a health care bill: Universal access, affordability, cost containment, divorcing insurance from employment and accountability.

But the phrase could also scare some lawmakers away from the proposal.

Sen. Kevin Mullin, R-Rutland, a member of the Senate Health Care Committee, said proclaiming in the bill that health care is a human right could have "serious implications in the future."

He also worried at having the board creating the three options consist of members outside of the health care industry, saying that "scares me a little" because those companies, organizations and individuals working in the health care industry would be shut out.

Racine responded that he felt it was important to ensure that members of this board did not have financial ties to the industry. He said he envisioned it resembling the Legislature's Public Oversight Panel for Vermont Yankee.

"It's a comprehensive change," Racine said. "It's intended to be that way. The question is if this is too ambitious. Or is this the road we should go down?"

Racine's committee has spent most of the 2010 Legislative session in joint hearings with the House Health Care Committee, chaired by Rep. Steve Maier, D-Middlebury. That committee is expected to continue work on other cost-containment reforms, including possibly creating a statewide hospital budget.

Racine's announcement comes months after the Legislature held a massive health care public hearing. Hundreds turned out for the event at the Statehouse, a vast majority supporting a single-payer system.

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