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Vt. lawmakers resolve immigrant health care issue

By DAVE GRAM

MONTPELIER, VT.

Vermont Senate negotiators dropped an amendment to bar illegal immigrants from coverage under a new state health care program, delivering a victory Monday evening to human rights activists who had rallied repeatedly at the Statehouse to demand the change.

Instead, the three senators serving on a House-Senate conference committee suggested studying the issues surrounding providing health care to an estimated 1,500 to 2,500 undocumented farmworkers in the state, as well as others in Vermont illegally. Their House counterparts readily agreed to the proposal.

The fight over coverage for illegal immigrants was a late-session storm in otherwise smooth sailing for the centerpiece of Gov. Peter Shumlin's legislative agenda: a publicly financed, universal health care system that had broad support from Shumlin's fellow Democrats who control both houses of the General Assembly.

After the Senate last week adopted the amendment proposed by Sens. Randy Brock, R-Franklin, and Richard Sears, D-Bennington, activists with the Health Care is a Human Right Campaign of the Vermont Workers' Center, who had been providing strong grass-roots support for the health reform measure, turned on the senators.

Brock continued to defend his amendment Monday night, arguing that it is in keeping with federal law, and that if Vermont wants the federal permissions it needs to pursue its envisioned health system reform, it can't flout federal immigration law.

"It's clear we need a federal immigration policy that makes sense, and we need a guest worker program," Brock said. "But it's also clear that Vermont cannot and should not provide insurance coverage to people who are not here lawfully."

Brock is not on the conference committee, and the senators who are showed their willingness to jettison his and Sears' amendment under pressure from the activists.

Sen. Claire Ayer, chairwoman of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee and the leader of the Senate conferees, read from proposed legislative findings that pointed out apparent contradictions in federal law:

"Federal law requires certain health care providers to provide emergency treatment to all individuals, regardless of immigration status. Federal law prohibits coverage of undocumented immigrants through Medicaid and through the Exchange," a new health insurance marketplace that the Vermont bill calls for setting up, in keeping with the federal health care law passed last year, the proposed findings said.

The Senate proposal called for asking the Green Mountain Care Board, which already is to conduct several other studies to get the state ready for universal health care, to add the immigration issue to its list.

House conferees quickly agreed.

"The human rights perspective certainly is a worthy one," Rep. Michael Fisher, D-Lincoln, vice chairman of the House Health Care Committee and a member of the conference committee, said in an interview shortly after Monday evening's session. "There's also financial issues that warrant our attention, and legal ones."

