

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “What’s the Prognosis?: Examining Medicare Proposals to Improve Patient Access to Care & Minimize Red Tape for Doctors”

October 19, 2023

It is now day 17 of the House being paralyzed without a Speaker, and we are 29 days away from another potential government shutdown. This hearing comes at a time when House Republicans’ dysfunction is hurting the American people, weakening our economy, and undermining our national security.

All year, House Republicans have caved to the extreme elements in their party who have no interest in governing. They have forced severe cuts to critical federal programs in spite of a funding agreement between the former Speaker and President Biden. And they came dangerously close to a government shutdown that would have cost our national economy upwards of \$13 billion a week and forced our troops to work without pay.

I just think the American people deserve better. Democrats have repeatedly stopped this chaos and dysfunction from hurting everyday Americans, but it is long past time for House Republicans to reject the extremists in their party. We should be working together to lower costs for American families and to grow our economy and the middle-class. It is time for the chaos to end.

Turning to the topic of today’s hearing, Medicare has played a critical role in the lives of our nation’s seniors and disabled Americans since its enactment. Medicare is the main source of health care for most of our nation’s seniors and disabled individuals, and we must ensure it remains sustainable long term and delivers the highest quality care.

I have significant concerns about the process leading up to today’s hearing. My Republican colleagues shared a vast majority of the discussion drafts we will be discussing less than a week before the hearing was noticed. Many of these drafts are still half-baked. And given the broad array of topics and bills, I am disappointed that we did not have adequate time to fully vet some of these policies and provide Democratic input from the beginning.

The Republican majority has also put forward a long list of expensive Republican-led bills that could collectively cost billions of dollars without any proposed way of paying for them. This is especially ironic given that just yesterday in a speech on the House floor nominating Jim Jordan as their candidate for Speaker, Republicans expressed concern with Medicare’s finances and cited their support for Jordan because of his desire to make devastating cuts to our nation’s social safety net health care programs.

It's unfortunately a pattern we see over and over again from Republicans, pushing forward expensive policy changes and then demanding devastating spending cuts to Medicare that would increase costs for seniors. The truth is Medicare is not broke; it does not need major changes, and it certainly does not need terrible Republican ideas to cut benefits, raise the retirement age, or increase seniors' cost-contributions. What we need is for Republicans to stop their infighting so Congress can come together to find bipartisan solutions for the American people.

While some of the policies before us today may have merit and address critical needs of both Medicare patients and providers, unfortunately my Republican colleagues have thus far refused to engage with us constructively or propose a path forward to move these bills on a bipartisan basis. Given the Republican majority's unproductive track record on the House floor this Congress, I remain concerned that we are not going to be able to successfully move a bipartisan legislative package out of Committee, onto the House floor, and to the President's desk.

My Republican colleagues also rejected Committee Democrats' sole request to include legislation in today's hearing that would directly expand access to care and reduce health care costs for seniors. The majority refused to include H.R. 5630, the Helping Low-Income Seniors Afford Care Act, led by Representative Craig. The bill would directly expand coverage for seniors and lower their out-of-pocket costs by extending funding for outreach and enrollment programs.

These programs help low-income Medicare beneficiaries enroll in Medicare and access benefits that lower their out-of-pocket costs. Thanks to these programs, about 3.5 million Medicare beneficiaries have received assistance, and the number of seniors enrolled in the Low-Income Subsidy program increased from 11.8 million in 2014 to 14.2 million in 2020. A broad coalition of 57 organizations support the extension and expansion of the outreach and enrollment programs.

I am also concerned that the totality of these proposals would result in significant funding cuts to the Medicare program and raise health care costs for seniors through increased premiums. This will place additional undue burdens on our nation's seniors and raise their out-of-pocket costs. Democrats stand united in opposition to any Republican efforts to cut Medicare benefits, raise the retirement age, or increase seniors' cost-sharing or premiums, and we will continue the fight to protect the Medicare program.

I thank all of our witnesses for being here today, and I yield back.