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CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR. | 116TH CONGRESS

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Pallone Opening Remarks at Oversight Hearing with CMS Administrator Verma

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks at an Oversight and Investigations hearing on “Sabotage: The Trump Administration’s Attack on Health Care:”*

Today’s hearing continues this Committee’s ongoing work to bring oversight and accountability to the Trump Administration’s relentless attack on people’s health care. Whether it be attacks on the Affordable Care Act, Medicare or Medicaid, since day one this Administration has engaged in a concentrated effort to undermine, weaken, and outright eliminate health insurance coverage for tens of millions of Americans.

Our witness today is the Administrator for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), Seema Verma, who is the Administration’s point person on these actions. She has a difficult record to defend: during her time as the Administrator, health care costs have gone up and health insurance coverage has gone down.

Thanks to the Administration’s policies, the number of uninsured Americans increased by nearly two million people from 2017 to 2018 – rising to 27.5 million uninsured. And between December 2017 and this June, more than one million children lost health care coverage through either Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

These are disturbing trends, and, unfortunately, they could get even worse if CMS and this Administration are successful in pushing their harmful policies.

The Trump Administration is actively supporting a lawsuit that would overturn the Affordable Care Act. This would strip health insurance away from tens of millions of Americans and would allow insurance companies to once again discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions.

The Administration has expanded junk insurance plans that are NOT required to cover essential health benefits like hospitalization, prescription drugs and emergency care services.

The Administration is also placing extremely burdensome and, in some cases, illegal hurdles in front of Medicaid beneficiaries. These unnecessary roadblocks are certainly causing pain for low-income families – as more than one million children lost health care coverage through either Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program between December 2017 and June of this year.

These disturbing numbers show that the Trump Administration’s policies to drive people off Medicaid, tie them up in red tape, or scare them into not even applying for insurance in the first place, are working.

I am also deeply concerned by the Trump Administration’s ongoing attempts to impose illegal work requirements waivers on Medicaid beneficiaries. These requirements are not only cruel and costly, but they are a clear violation of both Medicaid statute and longstanding congressional intent. Fortunately, these illegal actions have been rightfully defeated in the courts, but the Administration refuses to give up.

The Administration is also not giving up on its ongoing attempts to sabotage the health care of millions of Americans through the ACA. In some instances, the proposals have been so extreme that even Administrator Verma has raised the red flag. In an internal memo dated August 2018, Ms. Verma wrote that several Administration proposals at the time, would, “cause coverage losses, further premium increases, and market disruption.” The memo concluded that 1.1 million Americans could lose their coverage.

I have repeatedly requested Ms. Verma provide the underlying analysis discussed in that memo. If the Administration is pursuing a policy that will have harmful impacts on millions of Americans, Congress, and the American people, have a right to know what exactly that analysis shows. To date, I have received a one-and-one-half page response that answers none of my questions.

Under Ms. Verma’s leadership, CMS is following the rest of the Trump Administration in stonewalling legitimate Congressional oversight requests. I am appalled by the flimsy non-responsive letters this Committee has received back from CMS, many times well past the deadline. As I wrote in a letter to both Secretary Azar and Administrator Verma last week, obstruction of the Committee’s legitimate exercise of its oversight responsibilities is unacceptable and, if continued, may necessitate the use of additional measures, including compulsory process.

Administrator Verma, you cannot flout this Committee’s constitutional duty to conduct oversight. I appreciate you being here today, but the stonewalling of our oversight requests must end. With that, I yield back.

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