

Congress Must Not ‘Hurry Up’ Health Care Reform

By John Hart

Many Americans are taken aback by the “hurry up” nature that seems to be the norm of the 111th Congress. In June, the House rushed to pass a 1,200-page climate change bill, leaving members little time to study what they were passing. And with Congress looking to an August recess, the Democratic leadership hopes to have both chambers pass a massive healthcare overhaul measure before members go home for the summer.

All citizens agree that changes are needed in America’s health care system, and because whatever action Congress takes will clearly affect all Americans, now is not the time to rush a bill through, just to have something passed by an arbitrary deadline. Congress must take it slow to craft legislation that ensures high-quality, affordable health care for all Americans. In an unnecessary haste to pass a bill, Congress could do far more harm than good.

It is important that Congress take it slow, particularly for the unique health care needs and challenges facing rural America. Rural health care is faced with a number of disparities not found in urban areas. There continues to be a critical shortage of health care facilities and qualified health care professionals in rural areas.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, where only 9 percent of physicians in our country practice. Estimates show that 50 million Americans live in areas with too few providers to meet their basic primary care needs.

It is critical that any national reforms to health care increase the access to care for rural citizens. Top on the list are equitable Medicare payment rates to rural hospitals and physicians as one way to expand health care services in rural areas.

Equally important are government programs and incentives that encourage health care professionals to practice in areas that are underserved, many of which are in rural areas.

The latest technology must be readily available to citizens of rural America. That’s why Farm Bureau supports Health Information Technology to transform our nation’s health care delivery system into a higher quality, more efficient system.

Any health care reform must include measures to reduce the costs of health insurance to rural and urban residents alike. Free market competition is the best way to do this.

Farms and ranches operate on tight profit margins, with unprofitable years nearly as common as profitable ones. Because health insurance costs are ongoing and significant expense for farm operations, Farm Bureau opposes compulsory health insurance in the form of an individual coverage mandate.

Most farmers and ranchers are self-employed individuals and purchase their own health insurance. Continuation of the tax deduction for health insurance premiums paid by the self-employed is a must.

Bottom line: for health reform to succeed, it must address both access and cost.

A truism that we all know is “haste makes waste.” Leaders who hope to rush a health care bill through Congress in less than a month’s time would do well to remember this. In its haste, Congress could bring permanent harm to American health care that though flawed, is still the finest in the world.