Clinton Defends Federal Health Care Law in Speech

Andrew Demillo, Associated Press

Bill Clinton urged opponents of the federal health care law Wednesday to stop trying to repeal it and instead work to improve it, as the White House enlisted the former president to make the case for its signature domestic accomplishment.

Speaking at his presidential library in downtown Little Rock, Clinton offered a detailed defense and explanation of the law as a key part of its implementation nears. His nearly hour-long speech was the first in a series of addresses expected by administration officials and allies defending the law this fall.

"It seems to me that the benefits of the reform can't be fully realized and the problem certainly can't be solved unless both the supporters and the opponents of the original legislation work together to implement it and address the issues that arise whenever you change a system this complex," Clinton told more than 300 people. "There are always drafting errors, unintended consequences, unanticipated issues. We're going to do better working together and learning together than we will trying over and over again to repeal the law or rooting for the reform to fail."

Clinton's speech comes with the Affordable Care Act in final countdown mode, just a few weeks before the scheduled Oct. 1 launch of online health insurance markets in the states. The markets — also called exchanges— are supposed to be a one-stop portal to the benefits of the law. Middle-class people with no access to health care on the job will be eligible for subsidized private coverage, while the poor and near-poor will be steered to Medicaid in states agreeing to expand the program. Markets

will open in all the states, even those refusing to expand Medicaid.

Even though Clinton's speech was overshadowed by the Syria debate, the White House hopes to get a much-needed boost from the former president. Obama, who has dubbed the 42nd president the "secretary of explaining stuff," tapped Clinton's persuasive powers during the congressional debate over the health care law, sending him to Capitol Hill to cajole worried Democrats.

Clinton, who unsuccessfully pushed for health care reform as president, praised the 2010 law for addressing the cost and availability of health care.

"This does give us the best chance we have to achieve nearly universal coverage, provide higher quality health care and lower the rate of cost increases, which we have got to do in a competitive global economy," he said.

Clinton offered suggestions to improve the law, including expanding the availability of tax credits for small businesses. He also called on Congress to address a glitch in the law that prevents some workers who can't afford the employer coverage that they are offered on the job from getting financial assistance from the government to buy private health insurance on their own.

Clinton's home state has turned into a major battleground over the health care law, and an example of how even Republican-trending states are still willing to embrace some elements of the federal overhaul. The GOP-led Legislature approved an alternative to expanding Medicaid under the law earlier this year, backing a plan to use federal funds to purchase private insurance for thousands of low-income residents.

Republicans in 2010 unseated incumbent Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln by tying her to the federal health care law, and hope to do the same with Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor next year. Pryor has defended his vote for the overhaul and has been touting the benefits Arkansas will see.

Republicans in the state's congressional delegation have also been split over efforts to tie any spending bills this fall to efforts to defund the health care law. GOP Sen. John Boozman and Rep. Steve Womack have spoken out against the approach, warning it would lead to a government shutdown since the Senate and White House are certain to oppose any defunding efforts.

The expansion, which Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe signed into law, sharply divided Republicans in the state House and Senate. Backers of the move called it a conservative compromise that would help businesses, while opponents said it was no different than expanding Medicaid's enrollment.

Clinton praised Republicans and Democrats in the Arkansas Legislature for finding a way to work together on the insurance expansion.

"My view is Arkansas did a good thing, a bipartisan thing, a practical thing and the rest of us ought to get behind them and help them," he said.

Clinton spoke to a packed hall that included Beebe and lawmakers, including Republican legislative leaders who say they still oppose the health overhaul despite the state's plan to expand coverage.

"I continue to think the Affordable Care Act is bad policy for the country, but meanwhile I'm still convinced we did the right thing for Arkansas," House Speaker Davy Carter, R-Cabot, said after the speech.

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