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State Senate to watch US health plan

The Boston Globe

By Kay Lazar, Globe Staff | June 16, 2009

Aiming to ensure that any overhaul of the nation's healthcare system does not undermine the landmark Massachusetts health insurance law, legislative leaders will announce a special state Senate committee today to monitor congressional action and suggest potential changes.

Senate President Therese Murray, who championed the 2006 law mandating nearly universal insurance coverage in Massachusetts and sponsored last year's sweeping legislation to rein in costs, is sponsoring today's order, said her spokesman, David Falcone.

Chairing the new committee will be Senator Richard Moore, an Uxbridge Democrat who also is one of several state lawmakers invited to the White House tomorrow to discuss how the Massachusetts' experience can help national leaders as they craft their blueprint.

"There are a number of ideas on the plate down there, and we need to stay close, so that we know what and how any of these ideas impact what we have done," Moore said. "We want to make sure that the federal law will complement what we have done."

For instance, soaring healthcare costs have become a pressing issue, both in Massachusetts and nationally. A state commission, appointed last year, is nearing a recommendation that insurers radically change the way they pay doctors and hospitals. But to revamp that system, Massachusetts would need a federal waiver, something that could be jeopardized under the current national initiative, Moore said.

Also of concern are state rules that went into effect in January requiring residents to have insurance that meets minimum standards. Those standards, hotly debated for months before they were instituted, include requirements for prescription drug coverage, doctor visits for preventive care, and several other services considered key to a basic insurance plan.

"The federal government may well set [minimum] standards, either in legislation or by regulation, and we certainly wouldn't want those standards to undermine and set a lower bar than we have set," Moore said.

His seven-member committee plans to hold public hearings, starting in Boston July 8, to take testimony about the federal plan's potential impact on the state's law. .

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