

Senate and Assembly approve waiver bill

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The Assembly and Senate approved along party lines requiring the Department of Health to receive permission from the Legislature before asking the federal government for a waiver or to change an existing one.

The bill that cleared the Senate 18-15 and the Assembly 59-32 was pared back from an earlier version that would've applied the requirement to all agencies.

The change focuses the requirement on healthcare and would prevent the Department of Health Services from applying for a change to the Medicaid program without getting legislative approval. Under Gov. Scott Walker, Republicans have rejected accepting federal money through the Affordable Care Act to expand Medicaid. But Gov.-elect Tony Evers has pledged to see that money.

Other provisions in the bill including putting into statute provisions from federal waivers on drug screening and testing in the food stamp program and work requirements for able-bodied adults on the medical assistance program.

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A coalition of healthcare groups had urged lawmakers to drop provisions in the bill, saying they were too complex to accurately gauge the full impact considering how quickly lawmakers were pushing them through the Legislature.

"It could not be further from the truth that my colleagues across the aisle care about health care," said Rep. Katrina Shankland, D-Stevens Point. "There's a reason why almost every single health care group that has an interest on this bill asked us to either slow this down or stop it in its tracks."

Many Republican speakers in the Assembly debate focused on the importance of

enacting work requirements for able-bodied Medicaid recipients.

Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, said these requirements would “help people get off the benefit program and into the workforce, at a time where we need people to participate more than ever.”