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American Bridge 21st Century: Trump's nothingburger health care plan

Posted on Friday, Sep 25, 2020

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WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump will declare Thursday that it is "the policy of the United States" to protect people with preexisting conditions, while also suing to toss out current preexisting condition protections.

Trump plans to sign an executive order in North Carolina laying out the policy, according to White House officials. But even they concede it will have no legal effect.

At the same time, the White House has joined a lawsuit brought by 20 Republican-led states attempting to repeal the entire Affordable Care Act, which bans insurers from denying coverage or jacking up prices on people with preexisting health conditions. That case goes before the Supreme Court for oral arguments Nov. 10.

Thursday's announcement was billed as "President Trump's Healthcare Vision for America" but contained no tangible action. Trump has long promised a "beautiful" and "phenomenal" healthcare plan that provides everyone with better coverage for a lower cost, but his administration never unveiled any comprehensive reform plan, even as it was trying to overturn the Affordable Care Act.

Both key planks of Trump's healthcare vision Thursday essentially boil down to directing Congress — which has repeatedly failed to repeal Obamacare or offer a consensus replacement plan — to figure it out.

Asked how people with preexisting conditions will be protected if the ACA is overturned, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said, "we will work with

Congress or otherwise to ensure that they're protected."

The plan also promises to ban surprise medical billing, but only after the election. The executive order directs Congress to pass legislation to end the practice of surprise billing — when a person goes to a hospital inside their insurance network but is nonetheless hit with medical bills because workers in the hospital are out-of-network — by Jan. 1.

While widely derided as unethical exploitation of vulnerable patients, surprise billing is nonetheless lucrative business for those doing the billing. Doctors and insurance companies have been in a lobbying war over how to fix the problem, and Congress has done nothing to stop it.

Given Congress' past failures to act on surprise medical billing, the proximity of the election, the need to keep the government from shutting down at the end of September, and the coming fight over a Supreme Court nominee in the Senate, a Jan. 1 deadline is, at best, optimistic.

If Congress fails to meet the deadline, Azar will be tasked with exploring other options. Azar did not say what those might be. When asked why they are not taking action now, Azar said the plan "is what it is."

Read more here.