



SENATE REJECTS HEALTH CARE SUBSIDIES



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., joined at left by Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., speaks to reporters Tuesday after a closed-door meeting with fellow Republicans at the Capitol in Washington.

MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate rejected legislation Thursday to extend Affordable Care Act tax credits, essentially guaranteeing that millions of Americans will see a steep rise in costs at the beginning of the year.

Senators rejected a Democratic bill to extend the subsidies for three years and a Republican alternative that would have created new health savings accounts — an unceremonious end to a monthslong effort by Democrats to prevent the COVID-19-era subsidies from expiring on Jan. 1.

Ahead of the votes, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York warned Republicans if they didn't vote to extend the tax credits, "there won't be another chance to act," before premiums rise for many people who buy insurance off the ACA marketplaces.

"Let's avert a disaster," Schumer said. "The American people are watching."

Republicans argue Affordable Care Act plans are too expensive and need to be overhauled. The health savings accounts in the GOP bill would have given money directly to consumers instead of to insurance companies, an idea that has been echoed by President Donald Trump.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said ahead of

the vote that a simple extension of the subsidies is "an attempt to disguise the real impact of Obamacare's spiraling health care costs."

Democrats immediately rejected the GOP plan, saying that the accounts wouldn't be enough to cover costs for most consumers.

The dueling Senate votes are the latest political messaging exercise in a Congress that has operated almost entirely on partisan terms, as Republicans pushed through a massive tax and spending cuts bill this summer using budget maneuvers that eliminated the need for Democratic votes. In September, Republicans tweaked Senate rules to push past a Democratic blockade of all of Trump's nominees.

The Senate voted 51-48 not to move forward on the Democratic bill, with four Republicans — Maine Sen. Susan Collins, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley and Alaska Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan — voting with Democrats. The legislation needed 60 votes to proceed, as did the Republican bill, which was also blocked on a 51-48 vote.

No compromise

Some Republicans pushed their colleagues to extend the credits, including Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who

said they should vote for a short-term extension so they can find agreement on the issue next year. "It's too complicated and too difficult to get done in the limited time that we have left," Tillis said Wednesday.

But there appeared to be little interest in compromise. Despite the potential for bipartisan agreement, Republicans and Democrats never engaged in meaningful or high-level negotiations on a solution, even after a small group of centrist Democrats struck a deal with Republicans last month to end the 43-day government shutdown in exchange for a vote on extending the ACA subsidies.

Most Democratic lawmakers opposed the move as many Republicans made clear that they wanted the tax credits to expire.

An intractable issue

The votes were the latest failed salvo in the debate over the Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature law that Democrats passed along party lines in 2010 to expand access to insurance coverage.

Republicans tried unsuccessfully since then to repeal or overhaul the law, arguing that health care is still too expensive. But they struggled to find an alternative.

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MARIAM ZUHAIB, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., speaks Wednesday as Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., left, listens during a news conference on health insurance premiums on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Triggerman sentenced for Wolfe murder

SHALOM BAER GEE
Journal staff

Six hours after the man convicted of planning 25-year-old Esther Wolfe's Rapid City murder was sentenced to life in prison, the person who physically killed her received his sentence.

Circuit Court Judge Jeffrey Connolly sentenced 22-year-old Arkadius

Wright Sr. on Wednesday, Dec. 10 to 35 years in prison, with 10 suspended. The state had asked for 35 years, and the defense requested the judge suspend some of the charge to ensure Wright is supervised when he's let out.

"There is not a sentence that can be imposed that will undo what happened in February 2024," said Elizabeth Regalado, who represented Wright.

Wright admitted he shot Wolfe on Feb. 21, 2024. He pleaded guilty on Sept. 24 to first-degree manslaughter and testified against Ezekiel Mayweather, 24, who he said orchestrated the killing based on a belief Wolfe was involved in his brother's death. Michael Mayweather, who dated Wolfe, died in 2019 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, according to law enforcement's investigation. Wolfe was killed on what would have been Michael Mayweather's 25th birthday.

A jury convicted Mayweather on Oct. 9 of aiding and abetting first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit first degree murder, both charges that carry a mandatory minimum life sentence. He was sentenced in the morning on Wednesday, Dec. 10.

Sentencing differs from Mayweather hearing

The tone of Wright's sentencing stood in some contrast to Mayweather's in a couple ways. First, there was no question on what Mayweather's sentence would be. Wright, however, faced anywhere from no prison time to life for the manslaughter charge, which is a Class C felony.

Connolly said, "It is an incredibly difficult thing to do, to sentence someone to a Class C felony, ... one of the most difficult things we have to do as South Dakota district court judges."

"I understand the assignment, and it's an important one," the judge said, noting he's sentenced people from about seven years to upwards 80 years for a Class C felony.

As for comments from the prosecutor and Wolfe's loved ones, they contained the same amount of grief and the some of the sting present during Mayweather's sentencing, but with a touch of gratefulness for Wright admitting to what he did. There was no such talk at Mayweather's sentencing.

Chief Deputy Pennington County State's Attorney Gina Nelson told Connolly, "Arkadius Wright stands before the court in a much different position than Ezekiel Mayweather" and there was a "stark contrast" between the reactions of the two men in the wake of Wolfe's death.

According to trial testimony, Mayweather drove Wright to the location where Wolfe was on Pine Street in Rapid City across from the Exxon gas station on the corner of East North and Pine streets, gave him the gun and told him to kill Wolfe. Wright shot her once in the forehead.

Mayweather has denied his involvement. Wright, however, was honest with law enforcement from the first meeting after his arrest about a week later on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, Nelson said.

"He told the truth and he took responsibility," she said, highlighting he cooperated with law enforcement before he had a plea deal and at his own risk. She noted those risks will follow him into the prison system.

"That cooperation must mean something," Nelson said, although she echoed her statement from Mayweather's sentencing that, "Esther's life mattered."

She also added Wright was capable of making decisions and deliberately killed Wolfe in a public execution that was dangerous to the whole

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