

Daily News

McConnell Leads AHCA Senate Working Group Including Cruz, Lee, Expansion State Senators

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Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) is leading a group of lawmakers who will prepare the upper chamber's version of health reform legislation for a floor vote, *Inside Health Policy* has learned from an aide close to the talks. A Senate Democratic aide blasted the move as a signal GOP Senate leadership intends to release a bill closely resembling what was passed by the House.

The health care panel includes four members of Senate leadership -- McConnell, Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-TX), GOP Conference Chair John Barrasso (R-WY), and GOP Policy Committee Chair John Thune (R-SD). Finance Chair Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Budget Chair Mike Enzi (R-WY), and health committee Chair Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) represent the committees of jurisdiction. Sens. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Mike Lee (R-UT) represent the far right of the GOP conference. Sens. Rob Portman (R-OH) and Cory Gardner (R-CO) -- both of whom have voiced concern about the Medicaid expansion phase-out in the House-passed American Health Care Act-- are also on the panel. Sens. Tom Cotton (R-AR) and Pat Toomey (R-PA) are part of the group, as well.

Cotton spoke out against the original AHCA before it was pulled from the first scheduled floor vote in March.

Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Bill Cassidy (R-LA), who introduced more moderate health reform legislation early this year, are not part of the group. Several House moderates who voted in favor of AHCA said prior to the floor vote that they expected the Senate to make crucial changes to the bill to make it more palatable for centrists. Yet that is unlikely to happen, a Senate Democratic aide predicted, pointing to the makeup of the working group and an expected closed door process. That aide said the Senate bill will likely be "lipstick on a pig."

"There's no indication they are planning on doing anything but a behind-closed-doors process, outside of committee, that will be unveiled when they know they have 51 votes and then it will be placed on the floor," the aide said.

House Freedom Caucus Chair Mark Meadows (R-NC) said Thursday (May 4) he was working with Thune on an amendment to make sure the tax credits that would replace the Affordable Care Act subsidies are directed toward lower-income people. One wary House moderate Republican, Carlos Curbelo of Florida, also said he has been in talks with Thune and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL).

-- *Susannah Luthi* (sluthi@iwpnews.com)