

What's Next for Health Care Reform and Health IT?

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Despite seven and a half hours of discussion yesterday, the nation is no closer to a bipartisan health care reform bill. Although there were a number of items that both Democrats and Republicans agreed upon, such as reforming medical malpractice and reducing health care costs, they could not come together around the fundamental issue of what role government should play in reform. Democrats believe that the federal government should set minimum standards of care, coverage, and basic consumer protections, while Republicans believe the government should make smaller incremental adjustments and allow market forces to shape reform rather than government mandates and oversight.

The President's proposal, released on Monday that combines points from the House and Senate bills, did little to sway Republicans. Republicans showed no willingness to consider either of the current bills passed by the House or Senate, or the President's plan. They favor starting over from scratch with an incremental approach to health care reform rather than a comprehensive approach favored by Democrats. "We are too close to stop now" is the attitude held by most Democrats.

Reaching bipartisan agreement at this point seems unrealistic. Democrats will begin efforts to find support of the Senate-passed health care bill in the House, and are likely to use the reconciliation method for passing the legislation in the Senate. Action is likely to begin as early as next week.

What does this mean for information technology government contractors and health IT? The good news is that the Senate health care bill, Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act, is chocked full of health IT initiatives to reduce health care costs; eliminate fraud, waste, and abuse; and make health care more effective and efficient. In addition, the bill would require the establishment of a number of new organizations and expansion of existing organizations which will require IT to fulfill their missions, such as reinsurance, insurance exchanges, expansion of Medicaid and CHIP, information dissemination to consumers, and health care quality.

It's unfortunate that the nation's politicians were unable to reach bipartisan agreement on health care reform, but Democrats are not about to give up at this late date. If they succeed, government and health IT contractors can look forward to an environment ripe with IT opportunities to support the implementation of comprehensive health care reform legislation.