

HALL RENDER'S THIS WEEK IN WASHINGTON - JANUARY 5, 2018

CONGRESS RETURNS TO CROWDED 2018 LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR

The Senate returned to Washington this week to begin the second session of the 115th Congress. The House returns Monday of next week, which gives Congress eight legislative days to fund the federal government for Fiscal Year 2018. Prior to departing for 2017, Congress passed a temporary spending bill funding the federal government through January 19, 2018.

Beyond the spending bill, Congress will address a number of health care issues in 2018. The Children's Health Insurance Program needs long-term funding given that the stopgap spending bill only provided funds through March 31, 2018. Stabilization of the ACA individual markets also needs to be addressed, though stabilization legislation has lost steam since Congress repealed the law's individual mandate in the tax reform package passed last year. Also, the medical device industry and health insurers are seeking delays on ACA-related taxes, which Congress is addressing through work in the committees of jurisdiction.

FCC ADDRESSES RURAL HEALTH CARE PROGRAM

On January 2, the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") issued a notice of proposed rulemaking seeking suggestions on how to expand its Rural Health Care Program. The notice mulls several possible changes to the program in addition to raising the cap, including changing the definition of "rural health care" and cracking down on perceived waste, fraud and abuse.

In December, the FCC voted to put additional funds into its rural health broadband subsidy program. The funds will be redistributed to ensure all eligible applicants in 2017 receive money. The Rural Health Care Program distributes \$400 million annually for rural doctors, hospitals and nursing homes to adopt and pay for broadband internet access. The additional funds were necessary since the program reached its funding cap the last two years due to the increase in telemedicine use, as well as nursing homes being eligible for subsidies.

HHS RELEASES ASSOCIATION HEALTH PLAN RULE

On January 4, the Department of Labor released a **proposed rule** aimed to ease formation of "association health plans" that allow certain small businesses and trade groups to come together to seek better deals on health insurance. Additionally, the proposed rule would foster formation of association health plans by removing the requirement that associations have to have a purpose besides health insurance. The intent of the rule is to help small businesses buy health coverage more easily.

HEALTH-RELATED BILLS INTRODUCED THIS WEEK

On January 4, a bipartisan group of Senators introduced the State Offices of Rural Health ("SORH") Reauthorization Act of 2017 (S. 2278). In a legislative initiative led by Hall Render and the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health, Sens. Pat Roberts (R-KS) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), co-chairs of the Senate Rural Health Caucus, introduced the stand-alone bill. The legislation seeks to reauthorize the SORH grant program for the first time, maintains the three-to-one federal to state match and ensures greater accountability to HHS from state grantees. Other senators who have endorsed the legislation as original cosponsors are John Barrasso (R-WY), Bob Casey (D-PA), Charles Grassley (R-IA) and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI).

NEXT WEEK IN WASHINGTON

The Senate Finance Committee will hold a confirmation **hearing** next Tuesday for Alex Azar's nomination to be the next HHS Secretary. Azar was nominated by President Donald Trump in November for HHS Secretary. Although Democrats will raise questions about his time in the pharmaceutical industry heading Eli Lilly's U.S. operations, Azar is expected to be approved.

Also next week, the Senate HELP Committee will hold a **hearing** on the opioid crisis. The Medicare Payment Advisory Committee will hold a public meeting January 11 and 12 to discuss Medicare issues and policy question as well as develop and approve reports and recommendations to Congress.

THIS WEEK IN WASHINGTON IN HISTORY

1935: 83 years ago this week, President Franklin Roosevelt claims in his State of Union message that the federal government will provide jobs for 3.5 million Americans on welfare. In an attempt to address the nation's high unemployment rate, Congress would pass the Social

Security Act in August of 1935.

2007: 11 years ago this week, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) becomes the 52nd Speaker of the House and the first female to serve as Speaker. Pelosi would serve two terms as Speaker from 2007-2011.

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