

Sebelius To Call For Action Now On Health Care

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<?xml version="1.0"?> Sebelius to call for action now on health care ERICA WERNER The Associated Press

WASHINGTON_Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius said Tuesday that if confirmed as health and human services secretary, "health reform would be my mission."

In written testimony prepared for her appearance before a Senate committee, Sebelius pledged herself to President Barack Obama's goal of overhauling the health system to cover 48 million uninsured Americans.

"Inaction is not an option. The status quo is unacceptable, and unsustainable," said Sebelius, citing high health care costs she said were hurting families and crippling the economy.

"Currently, there's no relief in sight," she said.

Sebelius was appearing before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee nearly two months after Obama's first choice for HHS secretary, former Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle, withdrew from consideration while apologizing for failing to pay \$140,000 in taxes and interest.

Committee Chairman Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., has been battling brain cancer, but was expected to preside over Tuesday's hearing.

Since Daschle's withdrawal, some battle lines have been drawn over Obama's health overhaul plans. In her written testimony Sebelius didn't address how to pay for the plan or mention what's emerged as the most divisive issue _ a proposal endorsed by Obama and many Democrats that would give Americans the option of buying medical coverage through a government plan.

That proposal has incited strong opposition from Republicans and the insurance industry who contend it would drive private insurers out of business.

Daschle was supposed to lead the health overhaul effort as HHS secretary and head of the White House Office for Health Reform. When he dropped out of consideration the job was split up and a separate White House health czar was named.

Sebelius would still play a major role in health legislation efforts. Her background on health care includes blocking an insurance company merger in Kansas while insurance commissioner in 2001.

Sebelius, 60, a Democrat, used that victory as a central component in her campaign for governor the next year, casting herself as a staunch consumer advocate.

The health committee won't actually vote on sending Sebelius' nomination to the full Senate. That job falls to the Senate Finance Committee, which will hold Sebelius' confirmation hearing Thursday.

Sebelius didn't address the issue in her written testimony, but she's expected to face questions about her views on abortion. Anti-abortion groups are strongly opposed to Sebelius, a Roman Catholic who supports abortion rights. She vetoed several bills in Kansas to impose new restrictions on abortion providers or regulations on clinics. Just Friday, though, she signed legislation that ensures that women and girls seeking abortions are allowed to see ultrasound images or hear their fetus' heartbeat before the procedure.

"My sense is she has strong personal views, but has worked hard to make abortion as rare as possible," Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., a Finance Committee member, said in an interview.

The Health and Human Services Department oversees the giant Medicare and Medicaid insurance programs for the elderly, poor and disabled, and also includes the Food and Drug Administration. The department has a budget of more than \$700 billion and a work force of more than 65,000 people.

Associated Press Writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

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