

## President hosts forum to work on health-care changes

By: Alex Daniels

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WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama will convene a one-day "health-care summit" today to sketch the rough outlines of the health-care overhaul Congress plans to take up in the coming months.

The health-care gathering follows last week's "fiscal responsibility" meeting, which Obama also held in the White House.

Obama declared at that get-together that he didn't have "summit-itis."

The reason for the one-day forums, he said, was to engage the public in an open debate so it can fully understand the tradeoffs required of any policy change. "Some of us get on our high horse and say, 'We've got the answer to health care,'" Obama said.

Arkansas' Rep. Mike Ross will be one of 28 lawmakers in attendance today. In total, the White House said, 120 people have been invited.

Ross will represent the Blue Dog Health Care Task Force, a new creation of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of 49 House Democrats who bill themselves as fiscally conservative.

The Blue Dogs hope to broaden their area of interest beyond the federal budget, said Ross, who was elected chairman of the 12-member group. Fellow Arkansan, Rep. Marion Berry, is one of the task force's vice chairmen.

The task force plans to meet each week over the next several months to try to reach consensus on a set of principles. It is too early, Ross said, to say what the group might do, aside from backing an approach that will make health care more affordable "without running up our national debt."

The last major attempt at a health-care overhaul, in 1993, was spearheaded by current Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was then the first lady.

Representatives of patient groups and health-insurance providers say that effort failed not only because of the political climate of the day, but also because it didn't include input from all interested parties.

This time around, they are more optimistic.

By meeting in "an atmosphere of respect" at the White House, Obama can push health-care providers, patient groups, doctors and others to set broad goals without "digging into the details" too early in the process, said Myrl Weinberg, president of the National Health Council, a coalition of health-care, business and medical groups that advocate for patients with chronic diseases and disabilities.

Obama is "very sincere in his desire to be inclusive," Weinberg said.

Dan Smith, president of the Cancer Action Network, the advocacy arm of the American Cancer Society, said Obama's personal involvement in the meeting "demonstrates to a public that might be skeptical, that Washington is serious about getting something done this year."

Weinberg, Smith and Robert Zirkelbach, spokesman for America's Health Insurance Plans, a Washington group that represents insurance providers, said it is unlikely that the deliberations will result in a government-run health-care system.

"All the proposals that are getting serious consideration are taking a public-private approach," Zirkelbach said.

During the Clinton-era debate over health care, keeping the current system "was everybody's second-favorite option," he said. "Now, no group is satisfied with the status quo. Health costs are increasing at an unsustainable rate."

To prod Congress on the issue, Obama last week included in his budget proposal a plan to set aside \$643 billion to help pay for undefined changes to the healthcare system.

Sen. Max Baucus, the Montana Democrat who heads the Senate Finance Committee, which originates health-care legislation in the upper chamber, said he needed more details, specifically on an Obama proposal to pay for some of the changes in the system by limiting itemized tax deductions.

"My concern, frankly, is the viability of the down payment and how it will help Congress contain the costs associated with reforming the health-care system," he said in a statement. "I think we need to look first for resources within the existing health-care system. I encourage the administration to dig down deeper within the healthcare system to find savings."

For his part, Ross said the current system, which relies heavily on employer contributions, is "something we have to rethink."

"I'm not advocating socialized medicine," he said. "I'm not advocating a single-payer system."

Ross suggested that one option is a sliding scale with different levels of federal contributions depending on a person's income. He's certain about one thing. "We're not going to solve this health-care crisis in one four-hour meeting. But it's a good beginning."