



## Capital Region health leaders consider industry's uncertain future

*Concerns over Medicaid, insurance coverage continue*

*By Claire Hughes*

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If there's any group worried about an uncertain future, it's the folks running health care.

**Officials representing hospitals, the insurance industry, consumer advocates and even the state expressed concerns Friday at the Rockefeller Institute of Government during a forum intended to assess the potential impact of the proposed American Health Care Act on New York. But a question lurking throughout the event was whether, even as experts spoke, Republicans in Congress might vote down the proposal to replace the Affordable Care Act. (By day's end, there was no vote, but with insufficient support, House Speaker Paul Ryan pulled the bill, conceding that the ACA remained the "law of the land.")**

And that left the question, what's next?

No one was willing to venture an answer, except to say that the bill's defeat would not end moves to modify or dismantle the health care system.

The AHCA was Republicans' effort to fulfill President Donald J. Trump's campaign promise to repeal and replace Obamacare, as the current federal health insurance law is informally called. The seven-year-old law requires most Americans to carry health insurance, which millions of Americans now buy through the online exchanges it established, and has also

supported the expansion of Medicaid to Americans making up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

New York already had more robust insurance options for low-income families than most states, but has benefited from the increased federal funding through Obamacare. State officials had estimated that if the AHCA replaced Obamacare, New York would lose \$4.5 billion over four years. Much of that reduction would come from expected cuts to Medicaid, which the Republicans proposed to place a per-person federal funding cap on, rather than providing money based on the amount of services patients use.

**At the Rockefeller Institute Friday, state Deputy Secretary for Health Paul Francis said the proposed changes would have required a "fundamental reassessment" of the state's Medicaid program.**

Kate Breslin, chief executive of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, called the Republican proposal a "sneak attack" against Medicaid. Republicans ran for Congress promising to repeal and replace Obamacare, not to gut the health insurance program for low-income Americans, Breslin said.

Bea Grause, president of the Healthcare Association of New York State, a hospital lobby, warned those efforts to gut Medicaid would continue, even if Republicans do not come up with a new proposal to replace Obamacare. The health insurance program could be tackled in tax reform talks expected later this year, for instance.

The chief strategy officer for Albany Medical Center, Courtney Burke, said she was more optimistic about Medicaid staying intact, but wondered what other changes to health insurance coverage might affect care. For hospitals, continued future uncertainty makes it impossible to determine where to invest resources, seven years after pivoting to a sea change in the way Obamacare provided incentives to health providers, she said.

The head of an Albany-based health insurance lobby, Paul Macielak, offered his opinion that Americans were less interested in continuing to support Medicaid in the form it has more or less had for the last half century. Macielak recalled a question posed by futurist Ian Morrison in November at the New York Health Plan Association's annual conference in Troy: "Are rich people still going to write a check for poor people going forward?"

"I think the answer is clearly no," Macielak said.

His comment prompted a response later from Joan Hayner, the chief executive of CapitalCare Medical Group, who was in the audience. If Medicaid coverage isn't sufficient, she said, then doctors and hospitals look to make up the costs of covering uninsured patients by charging private health insurance companies more.

"We all need to be focused on Medicaid," she said.

Several panelists, though worried about the AHCA, conceded that Obamacare needed fixing if, as has happened, it remains the law for the foreseeable future. Insurance policies through the exchanges have been criticized for rising premiums and large out-of-pocket costs.

"Affordability is probably the biggest nut to crack," Macielak said.