

Politics

Act to fix law

Hill urged to cap Medicare 'cost'

NEW YORK, Oct 17, (RTRS): Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton on Friday urged Congress to rein in Medicare cost increases next year, expected to hit millions on the government health insurance program even as Social Security benefits stagnate.

Medicare expects Part B premiums, which cover doctor's visits and outpatient care, to rise 52 percent next year, which could hit around 16.5 million people.

At the same time, a lack of inflation will keep beneficiaries of Social Security from getting an increase in the amount they receive each month.

Because of how Medicare is structured, beneficiaries who rely most on Social Security will not see their premiums increase — leaving the remaining 30 percent of enrollees to pay for cost increases.

"I am deeply concerned by how this could harm Medicare beneficiaries. This is outrageous and senseless, and Congress must act to fix the law," Clinton said in a statement.

"I support efforts by the Obama administration and Democratic leaders in Congress to try to resolve this quickly."

Benefits

Clinton has said that she would like to "enhance" Social Security benefits for the most vulnerable seniors, including women in poverty, but she has not yet detailed what those changes could look like.

Progressives — including Clinton's main rival, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders — have pushed her to say she would expand benefits.

Sanders has proposed increasing Social Security benefits, cost-of-living adjustments and minimum benefit levels, to be paid for by scrapping a ceiling on the amount of income considered taxable for Social Security.

As President Barack Obama took questions from reporters Friday, about half of the inquiries focused on the campaign to replace him, not the issues he faces.

Did Obama watch the first Democratic debate? Does he think Vice President Joe Biden will make a late entry into the race? What about Democratic front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton's opposition to a Pacific Rim trade deal she backed when she worked for Obama?

The president made clear he was in no mood to play political pundit.

"During the course of what will be a long campaign, I probably won't be commenting on every single utterance or decision that the candidates make," Obama said during a White House news conference with the South Korean president.

As far as Obama was willing to go was to offer praise for Democrats on their display of party unity in Tuesday's debate, a not-so-subtle dig at a Republican field roiled by divisions. Still, the president made clear he'd only caught a few glimpses of the debate while watching playoff baseball.

For Obama, keeping a Democrat in the White House is crucial to his legacy and to maintaining his policies on immigration and health care, as well as the Iran nuclear program. But the Democratic field is shaping up in a way that puts Obama in an awkward position.

Joe Biden is brushing past signs of a Hillary Rodham Clinton resurgence with fresh and direct suggestions he could be on the verge of entering the 2016 presidential race.

The vice president's political team broke its months-long silence on the subject with a letter circulated by one of Biden's closest friends and top advisers. In the letter, though Biden is still officially undecided, former Sen. Ted Kaufman describes a "campaign from the heart" that Biden would wage and says a decision isn't far off.

"If he decides to run, we will need each and every one of you — yesterday," Kaufman says temptingly, alluding to the breakneck speed at which Biden would have to ramp up a campaign.

To its recipients — Biden's former Senate, White House and campaign staffers — Thursday's letter smacked of an unambiguous indication Biden was all but green-lighting a presidential campaign. Several individuals familiar with the letter say it was circulated with Biden's blessing. The individuals weren't authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

For his part, Biden has been silent on the issue for weeks while allowing his own self-imposed deadlines to fly by. His indecision has led many Democratic leaders to publicly write off his prospects, particularly as Clinton revels in a strong debate performance and an impressive stretch of fundraising, solidifying her status as the Democratic front-runner.



Sanders



In this photo taken on Oct 15, members of the Ute Tribe lead the procession for the opening plenary at the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions held inside the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City. Visitors from 80 countries and 50 different religions arrived in Salt Lake City to attend the interfaith conference being held in the United States for the first time since 1993. (AP)

Politics

Trump criticizes George W. Bush over 9/11, Jeb hits back

Six GOP WH hopefuls face tipping point

NEW YORK, Oct 17, (Agencies): Half a dozen Republican presidential candidates are edging toward financial crisis, raising the specter that some may be forced to drop out of the sprawling field of contenders.

They all spent more than they took in during the third quarter, according to campaign finance reports filed on Thursday. The six are: Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, former New York Governor George Pataki, South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum.

Together, they raised \$6 million but spent more than \$9.5 million during the summer on everything from postage to travel to campaign rallies. All six are traveling badly in the polls.

"They are living on the edge," said Lawrence Noble, former general counsel to the Federal Election Commission.

"We are getting close to the time when a lot of these candidates are going to say, 'We can't do it, it can't be done,'" said Noble, now a senior attorney with the Campaign Legal Center, a campaign finance non-profit.

Campaigns have tipping points: the moment when a candidate does the math and realizes that he does not have enough money on hand or the prospect of more money from donors to stay in the race. One telling sign is the "burn rate" — jargon for how much a candidate spends versus how much he is raising. If the burn rate is high and donor enthusiasm low, then trouble ensues.

Campaign

The math is simple, said Austin Barbour, who ran Ric Perry's fund-raising Super PAC before the former Texas governor dropped out. Barbour is now a senior adviser to the campaign of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush.

When direct donations to campaigns are lackluster, as in the case of these six candidates, there may not be enough money to cover basic operating costs

like travel, staff salaries and office equipment. Those costs are not typically covered by big money Super PACs, which are supposed to operate independently of the campaigns.

"It's really tough to survive with such little money," Barbour said. "It puts a lot of pressure on a campaign because no one wants to put their candidate in debt."

The third quarter reports show the challenges. Any burn rate over 100 percent is considered dangerous by campaign finance experts. Pataki's was 226 percent, Graham 188, Paul 181, Jindal 144, Huckabee 110 and Santorum 101.

Of those, Paul and Graham have the most money in the bank, with \$2.1 million and \$1.7 million respectively, while the rest are money-challenged. Pataki, for instance, had less than \$14,000 on hand as of Sept. 30, less than the \$17,600 billionaire candidate Donald Trump spent on yard signs in the third quarter alone.

The campaigns dismissed the suggestion they were in financial trouble.

Rand Paul's campaign stressed it still had the \$2.1 million on hand. A Pataki staffer said his burn rate was just the "cost of a campaign for President." And the Huckabee campaign said their candidate was experienced at running campaigns on shoestring budgets.

Spokesmen for Santorum, Graham and Jindal did not respond to requests for comment.

To be sure, tight budgets at this point in the race do not mean the campaigns are doomed. A candidate could have a breakout moment, like former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, whose fundraising soared after a good debate performance. Candidates can also lend themselves money, as Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton did when she ran low during the 2008 White House race.

But the Republican candidates are bedeviled by another math problem. There are 14 Republicans vying for their party's nomination for the November 2016 election, more than double the number at this point during the 2012

election.

"The Republican field is way too large, there simply isn't enough money to go around," said Noble.

Small donors are the lifeblood of any campaign and candidates will live or die by their ability to tap into a broad base of supporters willing to contribute up to the maximum of \$2,700.

Retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, who is one of the front-runners in the Republican race, reported nearly 22,000 donors in the last quarter who have given more than \$200 so far in the campaign. Bush had 7,300.

In contrast, Pataki had fewer than 80 donors last quarter; Jindal had under 300; Graham had nearly 650; Santorum under 300, and Huckabee more than 800. Among these five, Paul had the most, with more than 3,500.

The candidates could conceivably win the patronage of a millionaire or billionaire, who could funnel unlimited amounts of money into their Super PAC. But these fund-raising groups are prohibited from carrying out certain campaign activities and are therefore of limited help.

For example, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker had a Super PAC with money in the bank, but after burning through \$6 million in three months his campaign's coffers were bare and he was forced to drop out in September.

Perry, who quit the same month, hemorrhaged money and ended the third quarter with just \$45,000 on hand. His Super PAC returned \$13 million to its donors.

Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump once again provoked a tit-for-tat row on Friday by saying former president George W. Bush must share some of the blame for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Trump, who has made no secret of his dislike of the Bush family and has frequently baited rival candidate Jeb Bush, George W.'s brother, made the comment in a television interview.

"When you talk about George Bush, I mean, say what you want, the World Trade Center came down during his time," Trump told Bloomberg Television.

When interviewer Stephanie Ruhle told Trump, "Hold on, you can't blame George Bush for that", Trump refused to back down.

"He was president, okay? Blame him, or don't blame him, but he was president. The World Trade Center came down during his reign," Trump said of the twin towers that were brought down by Islamist militants in hijacked planes.

Trump's outburst was similar to his comment last summer that Republican Senator John McCain was not a hero because he had been captured during the Vietnam War.

McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, was piloting a fighter jet on a bombing mission over Hanoi when it was shot down, and he spent five and a half years in a prisoner-of-war camp.

George W. Bush generally receives high marks from Americans for his response to the 9/11 attacks and for preventing another attack on American soil during his eight years in the White House.

Jeb Bush reacted swiftly to Trump's charge.

"How pathetic for @realdonaldtrump to criticize the president for 9/11. We were attacked & my brother kept us safe," Bush tweeted.

Trump's tendency toward such rhetoric has not hurt his ratings so far, with polls of Republican voters showing he leads the 15-candidate field.

CNBC and the Republican presidential candidates agreed on the format for their third debate a day after leaders Donald Trump and Ben Carson threatened to boycott unless they got their way, the network said.

The Oct. 28 debate will be two hours long and will include closing statements from the candidates, CNBC spokesman Brian Steel said Friday.



Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks during a town hall meeting on Oct 16, in Keene, NH. (AP)

America

Michelle, Jill fete female vets: US First Lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden are set for appearances next month in the Lifetime special "Women of Honor," a celebration of female veterans and caregivers.

The hourlong program, set to air Nov 9 in connection with Veterans Day on Nov 11, will highlight the emotional experiences of three women, two of them who were in the service, the other a caregiver to her husband who lost both legs in Afghanistan.

"It is an honor and a privilege to work with the first lady and Dr. Biden to make this important program about the strength, courage and sacrifices made on behalf of men and women in uniform and their families. Our hope is that these stories will mobilize all of us to find ways to serve them, just as they have served us and this great nation," stated Nancy Dubuc, president-CEO of Lifetime parent A+E Networks.

The special will also spotlight Joining Forces, the White House campaign to provide resources and support to veterans and their families. Veterans issues have been a primary focus for Obama and Biden, wife of Vice-President Joe Biden. (RTRS)

Guard denies rumors: The Coast Guard on Friday denied widespread rumors that US immigration rule changes would soon clamp down on Cuban migration.

The statement came as the Coast Guard said it repatriated 57 Cubans picked up in high-sea interdictions aboard leaky vessels.

Cuban migrants, unlike those from any other nation, are allowed to stay in the United States if they reach land. But they are repatriated if picked up at sea.

Fear that this special treatment will end has led to a spike in attempted

crossings since Washington and Havana announced in December plans to restore diplomatic ties, which they did in July.

"We recognize that smugglers are perpetuating rumors of changes to our immigration policy and some people may believe it," said Captain Mark Fedor with the Coast Guard's 7th District.



Michelle



Biden

"They may get desperate and take to the ocean in very unseaworthy vessels which creates a dangerous situation.

"Everyone needs to understand the Coast Guard's missions have not changed so if migrants are interdicted at sea, then they will be returned to their country of origin," Fedor said.

The Coast Guard said it continues to

"aggressively patrol" the Florida Straits, the strip of ocean separating Cuba from the United States, "to detect and deter illegal and unsafe maritime migration."

In fiscal year 2015, 4,462 Cuban attempted to illegally enter the United States by sea, the Coast Guard said, up from 3,940 in the same period the previous year. (AFP)

Benghazi panel grills Clinton aide for 6 hours

WASHINGTON, Oct 17, (RTRS): Turmoil swirled again around the Republican-controlled Benghazi committee on Friday as it questioned a senior aide to Hillary Clinton, prompting fresh accusations that the panel was created to damage the Democratic front-runner's presidential campaign.

In a six-hour closed door interview, members and staff sought answers from Huma Abedin, for years a close confidante of Clinton. Abedin has served as the former secretary of state's assistant at the time of the 2012 attacks on US diplomatic facilities in

Benghazi, Libya that killed four Americans.

Democratic Representative and panel member Elijah Cummings told reporters that summoning Abedin raised more questions about whether the panel is "a taxpayer funded effort to derail the candidacy of Hillary Clinton."

Cummings said Abedin, now campaign vice chairwoman of Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, had no responsibilities related to the tragedy the committee was set up to investigate.

Abedin said little about the interview. But she read a handwritten state-

ment afterward, saying she "answered all of their questions to the best of my ability."

"I came here today to be as helpful as I could be to the committee. I wanted to honor the service of those lost and injured in the Benghazi attacks," Abedin said, adding she was "honored" to work for Clinton at State and "proud" of her service there.

Representative Lynn Westmoreland, a Republican panel member, said Abedin frequently answered questions with responses of "I don't remember" and "I don't recollect."

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