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Barack Obama may support insurance mandate

By CARRIE BUDOFF BROWN | 6/3/09 3:42 PM EDT
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As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama scoffed at Hillary Rodham Clinton's proposal to require people to buy health insurance.

"(If) they can't afford it, they just don't get it," Obama said during the primary, arguing that a mandate would not work unless insurance costs were lowered first.

For the first time, Obama confirmed Wednesday that he plans to stake out a different position as president.

In a letter to two leading Democratic senators, Obama said he could support a mandate on individuals to buy coverage, as long as Congress exempted those who could not afford it. This marks a shift from his stance during the campaign, when he tussled repeatedly with Clinton on the issue. She proposed an individual mandate, and he did not.

"I share the goal of ending lapses and gaps in coverage that make us less healthy and drive up everyone's costs, and I am open to your ideas on shared responsibility," Obama wrote. "But I believe if we are going to make people responsible for owning health insurance, we must make health care affordable."

"If we do end up with a system where people are responsible for their own insurance, we need to provide a hardship waiver to exempt Americans who cannot afford it," Obama wrote.

Detailing his positions on various health care proposals for the first time as president, Obama also said Americans should be able to choose between public and private insurance plans in a reformed health care system.

"I strongly believe that Americans should have the choice of a public health insurance option operating alongside private plans," he wrote. "This will give them a better range of choices, make the health care market more competitive, and keep insurance companies honest."

He offered qualified support for a mandate on employers to provide insurance or pay a fee to the government. Employers "have a responsibility to support health insurance for their employees," Obama wrote, but small businesses should be exempt.

Obama's positions on these issues were not entirely surprising, but his decision to weigh in before congressional Democratic leaders released a single bill was unexpected. Prior to the letter, Obama and his aides had declined to say specifically where he stood on various issues, including the public plan and individual mandate, saying they wanted Congress to lead the way in writing a bill.

But Democrats have been anxious for the president to take a more public stance, and the letter provides the guidance that many in Congress had been craving as House and Senate committees move closer to releasing draft bills.

"The president says get it done. Get it done right because we only get one chance," said Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. "The letter essentially synthesizes what the president is saying."

He outlined the parameters in a letter to Senate Finance Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.).

Obama's endorsement of a public insurance option could boost the controversial proposal and serve as catalyst for the Democratic base as the president kicks off a grassroots campaign Saturday.

"It's clear that the Republican resistance to a public plan hasn't softened President Obama's support for one," Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a statement. "This strengthens the hand of those of us advocating for a public option, which is the only way to keep the private insurers' feet to the fire."

Despite almost uniform opposition from Republicans on the public plan, the president wrote in the letter that he remains "hopeful that many Republicans" would back an overhaul bill.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), the ranking Republican on the Finance Committee, struck an optimistic tone in a statement, saying the letter "doesn't draw lines in the sand," and "is helpful because of his statements that reform legislation needs to have bipartisan support."

However, the letter is likely to incite opponents, who have been frustrated by Obama's lack of specifics.

Indeed, on Thursday morning, Conservatives for Patients' Rights will begin airing a new TV ad called "Bulldozer," which says a "government-run plan" will drive private insurers out of business and eliminate consumer choices.

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