

Risch, Crapo neither conservative nor compassionate

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If they had been looking out for their constituents, Idaho Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo would have followed Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and others in opposing their party's plan to replace and repeal Obamacare.

After all, Idaho is a poor state where many working people make too little money to afford health care insurance.

As the advocacy group Close the Gap Idaho tells it, Idaho relies heavily on a generous federal match to provide Medicaid to its poorest citizens, including:

- 185,900 children.
- Another 30,900 children with disabilities.
- 27,300 adults - primarily pregnant women.
- 25,995 senior citizens who also rely upon Medicare. This includes people in nursing homes.
- 18,914 disabled adults.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's plan to deeply cut Medicaid would have left Idaho with lousy choices - raise taxes or raid other state programs including public schools to compensate for the loss of federal dollars or cut the reimbursement to health care providers so drastically that many physicians would no longer see Medicaid patients.

Add to the mix the 78,000 low-income working adults who would have lost all hope that Idaho would expand Medicaid coverage for them. McConnell would eliminate funding for the expansion program.

And then there are the 82,802 Idahoans who rely on federal subsidies to purchase private insurance through the YourHealthIdaho exchange. The GOP plan, coupled with Sen. Ted Cruz's amendment, meant older people with pre-existing conditions would have seen their subsidies shrink while their premiums would have soared - probably beyond their ability to pay.

That added up to more than 107,000 Idahoans - including 30,000 children - losing their health insurance.

Even if you're lucky enough to have employer-provided health insurance, you risked seeing your premiums rise to cover the unpaid bills providers would have shifted your way. Taxpayers also would have been dinged as more of the newly uninsured turn to the county medically indigent and state Catastrophic Health Care programs.

Is it any wonder that providers - notably the Idaho Medical Association and the Idaho Hospital Association - urged Risch and Crapo to vote no?

Is it any surprise that hundreds of protesters turned out in Boise's 100-degree heat Saturday to get the senators' attention?

Is it any mystery why the longer the GOP held on to this bill, the less popular it became? As of Friday, 61 percent of the country took a dim view of the bill - up from 55 percent the month before, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation tracking poll.

If they were looking for an excuse to jump ship, Risch and Crapo could have followed three conservatives - Kentucky's Rand Paul, Utah's Mike Lee and Kansas' Jerry Moran - who ditched McConnell's bill on the grounds it was insufficiently pure.

How do you think Risch and Crapo got a 92 percent ranking from the American Conservative Union last year? Why did FreedomWorks rate Crapo at 84 percent? Why did the National Journal rate Risch the nation's most conservative U.S. senator?

It's because they take the ideological line, even if it means voting against the best interests of their constituents.

For example, last May they joined 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, in siding against a \$1.2 trillion spending package that kept the government open for business through the end of September. A government shutdown would have undermined some of the state's largest employers, notably the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls.

Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, bristled at being the only member of Idaho's delegation to vote yes.

"Needless to say," he told a Twin Falls audience, "I'm a little frustrated."

Yet here was a case where they could have had it both ways - casting their lot with both conservatives and their most vulnerable constituents.

Of course. that meant breaking ranks with McConnell and the GOP - which Risch and Crapo rarely do without permission.

So once again Idaho's ultimate team players lined up and did what they were told. - M.T.