

If Idaho's Simpson won't stand up, who will?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Perhaps the greatest irony about President Trump and congressional Republicans zealously striving to gut Obamacare is that they will wind up hurting the very people who sent them to Washington, D.C., in the first place.

That's because Obamacare props up people who are poor, older and sicker. In other words, Trump's base.

Idaho has those in abundance:

- Older - Of the nearly 100,000 people who obtained private health insurance through Idaho's state-based exchange, 25 percent are between the ages of 55 and 64. The national average is 20 percent.
- Poorer - Within this group, 84 percent qualify for subsidized private health insurance. And of those, two-thirds are deemed to earn less than 250 percent of the federal poverty rate - compared to 58 percent of the nation as a whole.

Just as Obamacare was being implemented in 2013, 15 percent of Idaho's population lacked health insurance coverage - compared to 13 percent nationally. As of 2015, Idaho's uninsured rate had dropped to 11 percent vs. 9 percent across the country.

- Sicker - The Kaiser Family Foundation estimates 25 percent of Idaho's population has a pre-existing health ailment serious enough that they'd have difficulty qualifying for affordable insurance under the new GOP plan. That's close to the national average of 27 percent.

Another group, Close the Gap Idaho, reports 42.8 percent of Idahoans have some form of a pre-existing condition, compared to the national average of 44 percent. That doesn't mean all of those people could not get insurance under the GOP plan, but they would pay more for it.

For Idahoans, the riskiest element of the deal moderate Congressman Tom MacArthur, R-N.J., worked out with Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador's House Freedom Caucus is its deference to the states to seek waivers from the federal "essential health benefits" and guarantees that people will pay rates based on their ages, not medical conditions.

How would that work under Idaho's political culture?

Not only was it hostile to the whole idea of Obamacare - but once the law took effect, the state refused to extend Medicaid coverage to some 78,000 low-income working adults. It had every reason to do so. Medicaid expansion would save Idaho taxpayers millions of dollars and by providing preventive care, it would save hundreds of lives. But the idea of admitting President Obama got it right was politically toxic to the GOP's base.

So you can only imagine what would happen to the thousands of Idahoans who now enjoy health insurance because of Obamacare's subsidies and its guarantees of consumer protections.

But one man may be in a position to bring all of this to a halt.

Depending on who is doing the counting, enough House GOP moderates have defected to bring the package within one or two votes of defeat.

They include Pennsylvania's Charlie Dent and Washington's Jaime Herrera Beutler - people Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson typically votes with.

Why not this time?

After all, Simpson is already co-sponsoring Oregon Congressman Greg Walden's measure to preserve insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions.

He's also been a champion of extending health care coverage - whether it was providing prescriptions to Medicare recipients, expanding Medicaid for children of the working poor under the State Children's Health Insurance Program or his advocacy on behalf of the National Institutes of Health.

Simpson is a team player, so abandoning House Speaker Paul Ryan would be painful. In fact, he said as much when Ryan's American Health Care Act collapsed in March.

But if the state has a political maverick, it is the nine-term congressman and former Idaho House speaker. It is his career where you see flashes of independence.

As a state lawmaker, he took a principled stand against an extreme anti-abortion rights bill.

As a first-time congressional candidate, he challenged an out-of-state term limits group.

Neither was considered the safe political play.

In the House, he's been the grownup in the room, casting unpopular but necessary votes to end government shutdowns and stop school vouchers.

Simpson also took the political gamble of his life to safeguard Idaho's Boulder-White Cloud range within a wilderness area.

If conscience doesn't sway him, perhaps the economic interests of his district will.

Not only do many of his constituents stand to lose under the GOP health care bill, but so does the sprawling health care sector within his district - from St. Luke's and St. Alphonsus medical centers headquartered in Boise to the community hospitals scattered along the Interstate 15 corridor.

The people who lose their health insurance under this Republican plan will continue to come through the hospital doors but they'll be unable to pay. So the medical centers will turn to other patients and taxpayers to cover the bills.

Here's betting no one will thank Simpson for doing this.

He may even pay a price politically.

Nonetheless, the future often comes down to a handful of people who are still capable of doing the right thing.

If not Simpson, who? - M.T.