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Health Policy Briefing

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House Passes Veteran Benefits Reform Bill

The House of Representatives passed the Take Care of America's Veterans Act (H.R. 9237) last week by voice vote. The comprehensive legislation would overhaul veterans' benefits, health care, counseling, and the Veterans Community Care Program. Opponents of the bill, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, have expressed concern about how the cost of providing increased disability benefits under the measure would be offset by reducing future benefits for sleep apnea and tinnitus. The legislation now goes to the Senate for consideration.

Senate Appropriations Releases Seven FY 2027 Funding Bills

Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Susan Collins (R-Maine) released the text of seven fiscal year (FY) 2027 funding bills last week: Agriculture-Rural Development-Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Military Construction-Veterans Affairs (VA), Commerce- Justice-Science, Energy-Water Development, Homeland Security, Interior-Environment, and Legislative Branch. The bills are the first appropriations measures the panel has released for FY 2027, with appropriators having failed to reach a bipartisan agreement on topline spending amounts. The Agriculture-FDA bill contains $7.3 billion for the FDA, in line with the spending measure passed by the House of Representatives and only slightly below the White House's budget request. The total FDA funding amount would include $3.5 billion in discretionary spending and the remainder from industry paid user fees. The Military Construction-VA bill includes $175.5 billion for veteran medical care. Under the current continuing resolution, lawmakers face a December 11 government funding deadline. Incoming Appropriations Chair Patty Murray (D-Wash.) has expressed support for the passage of a stopgap spending bill to fund the government until Democrats retake the majority in both chambers of Congress in January.

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HELP to Vote on FDA Nominee on Wednesday

The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee is scheduled to vote on the nomination of Heidi Overton, MD to lead the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Wednesday. Several Republicans committee members have declined to say whether they will vote in support of the nominee, including Chair Bill Cassidy, MD (La.), Susan Collins (Maine), Jon Husted (Ohio), and Josh Hawley (Mo.). Dr. Overton will likely require the support of every Republican on the panel for her nomination to advance to the full chamber, as all committee Democrats are expected to vote in opposition. Acting FDA Commissioner Kyle Diamantas is planning to leave the administration by the end of the year. If Overton is not confirmed in that time – while Republicans still hold a majority in the Senate – the administration is reportedly considering tapping Sara Brenner, MD to take on the role of acting commissioner. Dr. Brenner is currently a senior public health counselor to Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. She previously led the FDA in a temporary capacity during the early months of the second Trump administration. The Committee also plans to vote on the nomination of James O'Neill to serve as Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Stakeholders have expressed concern that the Committee is moving forward with a vote when it has not held a hearing on the nomination.

In related nominations news, Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) has released a hold on Sean Kaufman's nomination to serve as Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response. Sen. Cramer had placed holds on all executive branch nominations in response to several Fish and Wildlife Service easements in his state. He has begun releasing holds on some nominees as his negotiations with the administration continue.

Thune, Jordan to Lead GOP Next Congress

Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) was reelected as Senate GOP leader in a closed-door conference meeting last week. In the House of Representatives, Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) was elected to serve as House Republican Minority Leader next year, defeating current Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R-La.) in a secret ballot vote of 106-73. Rep. Jordan, a co-founder of the House Freedom Caucus, currently chairs the House Judiciary Committee.

Van Hollen to Challenge Schumer in Race for Senate Majority Leader

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) announced last week that he will challenge longtime Democratic leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) for Senate majority leader in the 120th Congress. "In this election, the American people called for change. They called for a change from Donald Trump's disastrous policies – but even bigger than that, a change from the status quo that isn't working for working people," Sen. Van Hollen said in a statement on Thursday. Van Hollen has served in both House and Senate leadership during his time in Congress. He has championed Medicare for All, a more progressive tax code, and elimination of the Senate filibuster.

Sens. Paul, Murkowski Announce Committee Leadership Intentions

Sen. Rand Paul, MD (R-Ky.) announced last week that he has chosen to serve as the ranking member of the HELP Committee, foregoing the role of top Republican on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Current HELP Committee Chair Bill Cassidy, MD, lost his primary earlier this year. Sen. Paul is an ophthalmologist who has historically been much more supportive of Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s agenda than Sen. Cassidy, particularly on the issue of vaccines. While it is expected that Paul will frequently clash with incoming chair Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the two have been aligned in their support of certain policies to address the price of prescription drugs, including allowing cheaper drugs to be imported into the U.S.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) will pursue the top Republican post on the Appropriations Committee next year. She would replace Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine.), who lost her reelection bid earlier this month. Sen. Murkowski's decision narrows the field of candidates interested in leading the Labor-Health and Human Services appropriations subcommittee.

Kennedy to Co-Chair GOP Doc Caucus

Rep. Mike Kennedy, MD (R-Utah) will serve as the next co-chair of the GOP Doctors Caucus in the 120th Congress, alongside Rep. John Joyce, MD (R-Pa.). Rep. Kennedy, a family physician, was elected by members of the caucus by unanimous consent. He previously served in both the Utah House and Senate while maintaining a family medicine practice, and was first sworn into the House of Representatives in January 2025.

Additional Midterm Election Results

Democrat Scott Colom has narrowly defeated Republican incumbent Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith in Mississippi's Senate race. Colom has served as district attorney for the 16th Judicial District of Mississippi since 2016. He will be the first Black senator from Mississippi since post-Civil War Reconstruction, and the first Democrat from the state in 44 years.

Rep. Greg Murphy, MD (R-N.C.) conceded his race to Democratic challenger Raymond Smith last week. During his time in Congress Rep. Murphy, a urologic surgeon, has been a staunch advocate on issues impacting physicians. He currently co-chairs the GOP Doctors Caucus.

For the 120th Congress, the balance of power in the House of Representatives currently stands at 256 Democrats and 169 Republicans, with 10 races yet to be called. The Senate will have 55 Democrats and 44 Republicans, with only the Alaska race outstanding.

CMS Delays Enforcement of Medicaid Work Requirements

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced an optional hold harmless period permitting states to delay the new Medicaid work requirements established by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. According to CMS, the hold harmless period through June 30, 2027, will provide states a transition period "to further modernize systems, improve processes, and streamline the applicant and beneficiary experience." The new policy requiring certain Medicaid enrollees to work, volunteer, or go to school was scheduled to go into effect on January 1. The agency stated that states choosing to implement by January 1 should use the transition period to assess whether individuals meet the requirement or are excluded from it, but should not deny applications or disenroll otherwise eligible individuals solely for failure to meet the work requirement. Twenty-five states plus the District of Columbia are currently suing the federal government over implementation of the law, arguing that it places unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles for medically frail people to maintain their health coverage; the litigation is ongoing.

President Signs Bill to Increase Access to Advanced Wheelchairs

President Donald Trump signed the Choices for Increased Mobility Act (H.R. 1703) into law last week. The legislation will modify Medicare payment rules for certain wheelchairs. It is intended to increase access to wheelchairs made with advanced materials by allowing Medicare beneficiaries to upgrade to lighter, more functional wheelchairs without bearing the entire cost upfront.

Upcoming Congressional Hearings and Markups

Senate Judiciary Committee hearing "Prescribing Sunshine: How Competition & Transparency Lowers Prescription Drug Costs;" 9:00 a.m.; November 17

Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee executive session to consider the nomination of Heidi Overton, of New Mexico, to be Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Department of Health and Human Services and James O'Neill, of Texas, to be Director of the National Science Foundation; 9:45 a.m.; November 18

House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health oversight hearing "Psychedelic-Assisted Therapies for Veterans: The Path Forward;" 2:15 p.m.; November 18

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing "VA Accountability and Transparency: Examining the Current and Future Path of VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization Program;" 4:00 p.m.; November 18

House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing "Beyond Go-Live: VA Electronic Health Record Modernization Status Update;" 10:00 a.m.; November 19

House Natural Resources Committee legislative hearing on H.R. 10751, Tribal Oral Health Sovereignty Act, and H.R. 10956, IHS Workforce Parity Act of 2026; 2:00 p.m.; November 19

Recently Introduced Health Legislation

S.5696 — A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve presumptions of toxic exposure, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Duckworth, Tammy [Sen.-D-IL]; Committees: Senate - Veterans' Affairs

S.5698 — A bill to amend the Public Health Service Act to protect the integrity of the United States Preventive Services Task Force, and for other purposes; Sponsor: King, Angus S., Jr. [Sen.-I-ME]; Committees: Senate - Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

S.5700 — A bill to amend title XVIII of the Social Security Act to provide for an option for any citizen or permanent resident of the United States age 50 to 64 to buy into Medicare; Sponsor: Baldwin, Tammy [Sen.-D-WI]; Committees: Senate – Finance

S.5702 — A bill to improve maternal health policies in correctional facilities, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Booker, Cory A. [Sen.-D-NJ]; Committees: Senate – Judiciary

S.5704 — A bill to require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to improve the detection, prevention, and treatment of behavioral health issues among public safety officers, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Rosen, Jacky [Sen.-D-NV]; Committees: Senate - Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

S.5709 — A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct an epidemiological study of certain health effects that have been experienced by women veterans, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Gillibrand, Kirsten E. [Sen.-D-NY]; Committees: Senate - Veterans' Affairs

S.5710 — A bill to support local educational agencies in addressing the student mental health crisis; Sponsor: Cornyn, John [Sen.-R-TX]; Committees: Senate - Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

H.R.10966 — To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to ensure that medical facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs maintain sufficient staffing levels of maternity care coordinators, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Mace, Nancy [Rep.-R-SC-1]; Committees: House - Veterans' Affairs

H.R.10969 — To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to establish a task force for the development of best practices for schools participating in the school lunch program relating to the time of day lunches are served, the time of day recess is offered, and the duration of lunch periods, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Schrier, Kim [Rep.-D-WA-8]; Committees: House - Education and Workforce

H.R.10970 — To amend title XXVII of the Public Health Service Act and titles XVIII and XIX of the Social Security Act to require coverage of certain cardiovascular tests without cost sharing under group health plans, group and individual health insurance coverage, and the Medicare and Medicaid programs. Sponsor: Vindman, Eugene Simon [Rep.-D-VA-7]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce; Ways and Means

H.R.10982 — To prohibit the availability of Federal funds for the facilitation of euthanasia, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Hamadeh, Abraham J. [Rep.-R-AZ-8]; Committees: House - Oversight and Government Reform

H.R.10983 — To amend title XIX of the Social Security Act to exclude certain gambling winnings from monthly income under the community engagement requirement under the Medicaid program; Sponsor: Harrigan, Pat [Rep.-R-NC-10]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.R.10984 —To amend title 38, United States Code, to empower the Veterans Health Administration to innovate, and for other purposes; Sponsor: McGarvey, Morgan [Rep.-D-KY-3]; Committees: House - Veterans' Affairs

H.R.10991 —To amend the Public Health Service Act to authorize the Secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to local educational agencies for the implementation of culturally responsive youth suicide prevention programs, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Menefee, Christian D. [Rep.-D-TX-18]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.R.10999 — To reauthorize the Expansion of 911 Access Program; Sponsor: Bacon, Don [Rep.-R-NE-2]; Committees: House - Agriculture; Energy and Commerce

H.Res.1661 — Expressing support for the designation of November 2026 as "National Lung Cancer Awareness Month" and expressing support for early detection and treatment of lung cancer; Sponsor: Boyle, Brendan F. [Rep.-D-PA-2]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.Res.1663 — Expressing opposition to the use of State power against people in the United States seeking essential health care, including criminalization of the full range of sexual and reproductive health care such as abortion, gender-affirming care, and contraceptive care, and disapproving of State punishment of people for their pregnancy outcomes; Sponsor: Williams, Nikema [Rep.-D-GA-5]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce; Judiciary

H.R.11009 — To stop the criminalization of miscarriages, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Beatty, Joyce [Rep.-D-OH-3]; Committees: House – Judiciary

H.R.11011 — To amend the Public Health Service Act to require the Director of the National Institutes of Health to develop a national strategy to address young adult cancers, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Carson, André [Rep.-D-IN-7]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.R.11013 — To amend the Public Health Service Act to protect the integrity of the United States Preventive Services Task Force, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Dexter, Maxine [Rep.-D-OR-3]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.R.11017 — To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish decision clocks for certain veterans' disability claims and administrative appeals, to strengthen accountability for claims adjudication, to improve clinical performance pay, to require benefits-system records interoperability and public reporting, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Fuller, Clay [Rep.-R-GA-14]; Committees: House - Veterans' Affairs

H.R.11020 — To establish a nonimmigrant classification for health and human services workers; Sponsor: Lawler, Michael [Rep.-R-NY-17]; Committees: House - Judiciary; Agriculture; Energy and Commerce; Ways and Means; Education and Workforce

H.R.11021 — To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a review and take specified actions to promote the accurate cancer screening of veterans, and for other purposes; Sponsor: Mace, Nancy [Rep.-R-SC-1]; Committees: House - Veterans' Affairs

H.R.11024 — To amend title XXVII of the Public Health Service Act to require group health plans and health insurance issuers offering group or individual health insurance coverage to provide coverage of allergy and asthma diagnostic testing and allergen immunotherapy; Sponsor: Onder, Robert F. [Rep.-R-MO-3]; Committees: House - Energy and Commerce

H.R.11025 — To amend the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 to entitle eligible employees to take neonatal intensive care leave; Sponsor: Pettersen, Brittany [Rep.-D-CO-7]; Committees: House - Education and Workforce; Oversight and Government Reform; House Administration

H.R.11029 — To amend title XVIII of the Social Security Act to establish a skilled-nursing-facility-at-home program under the Medicare program; Sponsor: Smith, Adrian [Rep.-R-NE-3]; Committees: House - Ways and Means; Energy and Commerce