

# THE ADVOCATE

## U.S. Sens. Bill Cassidy, John Kennedy offer amendments, stick with party as health care debate continues

BY ELIZABETH CRISP | ECRISP@THEADVOCATE.COM  
JUL 26, 2017 - 2:28 PM



*U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy speaks during a visit by Vice President elect Mike Pence to New Orleans to campaign for GOP Senate candidate John N. Kennedy at a rally at New Orleans Lakefront Airport Saturday Dec. 3, 2016. Photo: Bill Feig.*

Louisiana's U.S. Senators have toed the Republican Party line in key votes on the GOP's biggest attempts to dismantle the federal Affordable Care Act, as the health care debate stretches into Wednesday evening.

After supporting the effort to move forward on the "Obamacare" repeal and replacement effort Tuesday, U.S. Sens. Bill Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge, and John Kennedy, R-Madisonville, both voted in favor of a revised version of the Senate's "Better Care Reconciliation Act," which was defeated with the help of nine Republicans who opposed the controversial proposal Tuesday evening. Cassidy and Kennedy later also both voted on an unsuccessful straight repeal proposal, with the promise of a later "replacement" plan, on Wednesday.

The also both voted against a Democratic proposal to send the legislation back to committee so that protections could be added to keep Medicaid expansion in tact in states that have approved it. Louisiana last year expanded its Medicaid program, and more than 433,000 people -- mostly the working poor -- have received health care coverage through the expanded program. Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, has repeatedly called for Medicaid expansion to be protected in any health care overhaul.

Kennedy had said he would vote in favor of a repeal-only plan, citing his promise to voters to support the repeal of the health care law and support for the revised Better Care proposal.

But Cassidy's votes came as more of a surprise and drew more attention. A physician, Cassidy has proposed his own amendment that would overhaul the health care system. He made the rounds on major television programs promoting what he called the "Kimmel Test" that he said legislation would need to pass to win his support by providing more access to health care and protecting people with pre-existing conditions.

Nonprofits advocating for health care and low income residents in Louisiana said Cassidy broke his promise with the two early votes because neither Better Care nor the repeal-only option met the threshold he had set.

"Sen. Cassidy has shown, in a way that has been refreshing and sometimes surprising, intelligence, thoughtfulness, content knowledge and compassion in his assessments of the realities of the health care bills as they've worked their way through the House and the Senate," said Broderick Bagert, a leader of Together Louisiana, a faith-based advocacy organization. "He has said in many occasions and many different forms, in small settings and large settings, including face to face interviews and to members of Together Louisiana, that he would not support the Senate bill in the current form because it was too devastating an effect on individual people and on health care markets. And yesterday he voted for that bill."

Cassidy and U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, have offered up an alternative health care plan that would essentially block grant health care funding, leaving states to decide how to dole out incentives and programs.

"I'm all about those who don't have insurance or those who are poorly insured getting better care," Cassidy said. "Ultimately, to have better care, there has to be adequate financing for that care."

Cassidy and Graham, who pitched the proposal on the Senate floor Wednesday, were expected to formally file their amendment Wednesday evening, with a vote coming sometime in the next day or two.

Kennedy, who took office in January after serving 16 years as state Treasurer, also unveiled a series of amendments that he will propose including a proposal to establish work requirements for able-bodied adults who seek health care coverage through Medicaid and a call for a national strategy to combat Medicaid fraud. Both are positions Kennedy has repeatedly pushed. Medicaid fraud currently is largely handled on a state-level. In Louisiana, the Attorney General is the primary investigator.

Other proposals that Kennedy will make to the health care legislation include an amendment to require that ER doctors and the facilities at which they treat patients to be in the same insurance networks, preventing patients from receiving surprising and often costly "balancing bills," and an amendment to require health care providers to give written explanations of the services that patients receive to provide more transparency and accuracy.

Both Kennedy and Cassidy voted in favor of beginning the debate on the attempted health care overhaul effort Tuesday after the chamber stalled for several weeks on the effort. Vice President Mike Pence cast the tie-breaking vote as two Republican senators voted against the effort.

President Donald Trump, who campaigned on the repeal and replacement of "Obamacare," has openly railed against Republicans who might block the health care overhaul.

"Any senator who votes against starting debate is really telling America that you're fine with Obamacare," Trump said during a lunch with Senate Republicans last week, openly suggesting that Nevada Sen. Dean Heller would lose his reelection next year if he votes against the GOP effort. Heller eventually voted in favor of moving forward with the debate on the repeal effort.

Such election threats don't carry as much force against Louisiana's senators because of the state's current cycle.

Both of Louisiana's senators are Republicans, and the next regularly scheduled Senate election is 2020 -- the same year as the next presidential election.

*Advocate reporter Rebekah Allen contributed to this story.*