

Obama defends August deadline for health care bill

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama continued to insist Tuesday that Congress approve a health care bill before its August recess — a timetable Republicans see as excessive.

The fault lines in the debate remained intact as Obama said the American people want the overhaul done quickly, and Republican Chairman Michael Steele demanded: "Take your time!"

The United States is the only developed nation that does not have a comprehensive national health care plan for all its citizens, leaving about 50 million of America's 300 million people without health insurance.

Obama has made overhauling health care his top domestic priority and it has become the pivotal issue of his young presidency. But Republicans and even some Democrats have been wary of the costs of hastily prepared legislation.

The president acknowledged in an interview broadcast Tuesday on NBC television that lawmakers right now are "not where they need to be." He has invited Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee to a meeting at the White House later Tuesday and he has a news conference scheduled for Wednesday night.

Asked why he felt so strongly about the timeline, Obama replied, "because if you don't set a deadline in this town, nothing happens."

"And the deadline isn't being set by me," he said. "It's being set by the American people."

Steele, the Republican Party leader said it's all happening too fast.

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"It took a year and a half for us to create the Medicare system," Steele said, referring to the government health care plan for the elderly that was established in the 1960s. "Now we're going to do the entire health care system in two weeks or six weeks."

"It is urgent and it is indisputable," Steele said, speaking Tuesday on CBS television. "The problem that I have with it is the rush that is under way here."

Asked about statements some Republicans have made indicating they think health care will damage his standing, Obama, a Democrat, replied, "It's typical. ... Somehow people think this is about me. This is all about politics. ... All I can say is, this is absolutely important to me, but this is not as important to me as it is to the people who don't have health care. I've got health care."

A new poll, meanwhile, showed that large numbers of Americans are worried about whether they will have future health coverage, with nearly one in four concerned that family medical bills will drive them into bankruptcy.

The survey of 508 people was conducted in June by the nonpartisan Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

Obama's meeting at the White House with House Energy panel Democrats follows a committee drafting session that lasted past midnight Monday as panel members slogged through numerous amendments, with majority Democrats turning back Republican attempts to change the bill.

But Committee Chairman Henry Waxman's bigger difficulties were with his own party, particularly a bloc of fiscally conservative Democrats who oppose the legislation in its current form over costs and other issues.

The House bill would, for the first time, require all individuals to have health insurance and all employers to provide it. The poor would get subsidies to buy insurance and insurers would be

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barred from denying coverage based on pre-existing conditions.

Prior to his meeting with the lawmakers Tuesday, Obama planned brief remarks on health care, something that's become a near-daily occurrence as the president has moved swiftly from hands-off to deeply engaged on his top domestic priority.

Obama's increased personal involvement comes with Republican criticism sharpening and outside groups growing more strident in the wake of a bleak prognosis from the Congressional Budget Office last week saying lawmakers' health proposals wouldn't hold down costs.

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