

Stowe REPORTER

Fairness a key issue in Vermont health reform



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From the House: Heidi Scheuermann

Every year, as the General Assembly works toward final adjournment, legislators know that they must pay very close attention to every bill coming up for action, as efforts to attach or hide various provisions in pieces of legislation become a favored way of doing business.

The shenanigans started early this year — in the fiscal year 2013 appropriations bill as it passed the House, and its relationship to this year's health benefits exchange bill and our state's health-care reform efforts, in general.

When it was introduced earlier this year, the Health Care Reform Implementation Act included provisions to repeal the Catamount Health program and the Catamount Assistance program. At the same time, though, it maintained the Catamount Employer Assessment, the monthly assessment that employers must pay to fund the program.

When some members of the House Health Care Committee objected, the re-peals were re-moved entirely. Unfortunately, the fiscal 2013 budget passed by the House did, in fact, eliminate the Catamount program (though not in bill language, just in a line item), but kept in place the employer assessment, and transferred those funds to the State Health Care Reform Fund. We now find that the elimination and transfer language was nestled into the 2012 budget adjustment bill, a bill that usually deals only with minor adjustments to the current-year budget and avoids matters with significant policy implications.

In addition to the objections to the shifty way this was done, there are two significant issues about which to be concerned.

The first is simple fairness. It is simply unfair to collect \$9.8 million from our state's small businesses to pay for a program that no longer exists. If our newest health-care reform efforts require an additional \$9.8 million, that money should come from the general fund.

The second issue is even more significant. As has become clearly evident, one of the primary goals of our state's health-care reform effort is to decouple health-care benefits from employment. In fact, throughout this past year in the debate surrounding health-care reform, both the administration and legislative leaders have been very vocal in encouraging employers to drop their coverage once the health benefits exchange is in place in 2014. They would like as many Vermonters as possible to enter into the individual exchange market.

But, with the employer assessment still in place, employers who drop their coverage — as the administration and legislature have been encouraging them to do — will be required to pay the monthly assessment, again for a Catamount program that no longer exists.

Make no mistake, our health-care system needs to be reformed. Vermonters cannot continue to afford double-digit premium increases. But if any reform is going to work, it must be fair and it must be transparent. This proposal is neither.

Heidi Scheuermann, a Republican, represents Stowe in the Vermont House of Representatives. Comment on this article on stowereporter.com, or email letters to news@stowereporter.com