Reaction comes fast as House votes to repeal health law
May 5, 2017
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Local and statewide health care groups joined their national counterparts late Thursday in slamming the U.S. House of Representatives, which voted 217-213 to pass the American Health Care Act as a replacement for the Affordable Care Act.

Critics say the ACHA will leave millions of Americans with no coverage for pre-existing conditions and preventive care while causing instability in the health insurance marketplace.

Kaleida Health said in a statement it is still evaluating the full impact of the legislation, but said early indications are very sobering.

“Like most hospital systems across the country, we believe that modifications and changes are certainly necessary. But a repeal of the ACA could be detrimental to the patients that we serve,” it said. “It is clear that this legislation – in its current form – will weaken hospitals and health systems, reduce insurance coverage for millions of Americans (nearly three million in New York State) and directly impact patient care in Western New York.”

Liz Urbanski Farrell, director of member services and government relations at the WNY Healthcare Association, said the bill won’t improve access or ensure coverage for Americans with previously existing, chronic health conditions, but will cost more in states like New York that opt to ensure coverage for more needy individuals while placing a heavy economic and social burden on the country.

“The amended AHCA passed in the House today still takes away protections for the sick, poor and elderly—in fact, for anyone who is seeking to even control a pre-existing health condition such as cancer, asthma or heart disease,” she said. “The matter goes deeper than a cut to the operating expense of facilities that offer a lifeline and critical 24/7 access to emergency care in Western New York.”

U.S. Representative Chris Collins, R-Clarence, who joined House Republicans along party lines in voting for the bill, insisted the ACHA will improve access, reduce costs and provide Americans with the health care system they deserve.

“This puts us even closer to ending the Obamacare nightmare that has plagued Americans for the last seven years,” said Collins. “The legislation passed today increases competition and gives people the power to make their own choices with their own health care.

Physicians across the state are divided on the issue, which makes things a bit tricky for Dr. Charles Rothberg, a Long Island ophthalmologist and president of the Medical Society of the State of New York.

“Our members do feel passionately about the issue,” he said.

Personally, Rothberg was opposed to the bill and said it would simply shift the burden from the middle class to another group that is less able to afford it.
“Most of the provider groups, not just physician groups, were opposed to this and I think they have good reason to feel that way,” he said. “Particularly from a New York perspective, the bill in my view - not speaking for the medical society - doesn’t have a whole lot to offer New Yorkers.”

Insurers and labor groups across the state were also unhappy with the vote, citing the advances in health care and declines in uninsured. But they also expressed hope the Senate could make significant changes to the bill.

“This is a starting point, not an ending point,” said Julie Snyder, director of corporate relations at BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York. “As the bill advances to the Senate, we will continue to support our members - whose coverage remains unchanged in 2017 — while working with lawmakers on needed changes to ensure a stable market in 2020 and beyond.”

Roberta Rifkin, government relations at Independent Health, agreed, adding the insurer is concerned about what impact the level of tax credits and subsidies in the proposed new law will have on its ability to provide an affordable product that provides the kind of coverage to which people have become accustomed.

“This is a first step in a longer journey,” she said. “We are trying to focus our efforts on the underlying costs. We cannot predict nor control what Washington or Albany does. What we can control are the kinds of things we do here at the health plan with different programs to address underlying costs.”

Meanwhile, 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, which represents thousands of workers in the Buffalo region, said the AHCA would annihilate healthcare, while the New York State Nurses Association called it an “appalling” setback for the nation.

“This vote will go down in history as a defeat for patients across the country, as they will receive less care and get sicker if it becomes law,” said Pat Kane, association treasurer.