

Opponent of Medicaid, Medicare sworn in as Health and Human Services secretary

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Tom Price, Republican of Georgia, was sworn in Friday as secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Senate confirmed Donald Trump's pick for the cabinet post by a 52 to 47 vote early Friday morning along party lines. Price had served in the US House as the congressman from Georgia's 6th District since 2005.

Price, 62, a retired orthopedic surgeon from the Atlanta suburbs, is a staunch opponent of Medicare and Medicaid, programs that insure more than 100 million Americans. As HHS secretary, he will lead Trump's efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and replace it with as yet to be unveiled Republican legislation.

In his confirmation hearings before the Senate Finance Committee last month, Price would not go on record with his right-wing views on health care policy, repeatedly refusing to answer "yes" or "no" to questions from committee Democrats on whether he supported block-granting of Medicaid, privatization of Medicare or overturning ACA guarantees of insurance coverage to people with preexisting conditions.

The program popularly known as Obamacare, while providing modest government subsidies and guaranteeing certain "essential" services, was implemented for the purpose of slashing health care costs for corporations and the government and shifting cost burdens onto the working class. It requires uninsured individuals to purchase coverage from private insurers under threat of a tax penalty.

Democrats aimed much of their fire on Price for his "bad judgment" in actively trading shares of medical and pharmaceutical companies while he was shaping health policy in Congress. They had little to offer in resistance to his opposition to the ACA and his repeated claim in response to their queries: "People will

have access to the highest quality of health care at an affordable price."

Price's record, however, speaks to the reactionary character of his views and policies. His "Empowering Patients First Act," put forward in the House in 2015, calls for repealing the ACA's expansion of Medicaid, the insurance program for the poor jointly administered by the federal government and the states. About half of the 20 million people who have gained insurance under the ACA did so through Medicaid expansion.

Price, along with Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan (Wisconsin), has endorsed block-granting Medicaid, which would result in deep cuts to the program and denial of benefits to those who qualify. Since its inception in 1965, Medicaid has been an open-ended program, meaning that as more people become eligible, states receive more federal money.

Under block-granting, states would be given a set amount, or "block," of funds that would not keep pace with health care costs or increases in enrollment due to rising unemployment, poverty, natural disasters or other factors. States would be faced with the task of deciding who should be denied benefits—poor children, poor pregnant women, poor seniors?

The House Republican budget plan for fiscal year 2017 called for block-granting Medicaid. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimated that, if that budget had passed, Medicare spending would have been slashed by \$1 trillion over a decade.

According to the School Superintendents Association (AASA), nearly 40 percent of children in the US receive their health care through Medicaid. A recent report by the group estimated that under Republican proposals to restructure financing of Medicaid, the percentage of uninsured children could go from 12 percent to an estimated 21 percent or higher.

AASA projects that Medicaid cuts due to block-granting or placing a per capita cap on benefits would result in lost funding to special education grants and health services for students in poverty. School districts, some of the largest employers in communities, would be forced to furlough or lay off school personnel who are paid, in part or entirely, through Medicaid reimbursement.

The new HHS secretary also stands for the privatization of Medicare, the government insurance program that provides benefits to more than 55 million seniors and the disabled. In July 2009, speaking in opposition to the Affordable Care Act, Price wrote in an op-ed in Politico: “I can attest that nothing has had a greater negative effect on the delivery of health care than the federal government’s intrusion into medicine through Medicare.”

As chairman of the House Budget Committee, Price told reporters on November 17 that he expected Republicans in the House to move on major Medicare reforms “six to eight months” into the Trump administration. Privatization of Medicare, through vouchers or another system, has been a key feature of Ryan’s budget proposal for years.

Price indicated that the assault on Medicare would be tackled through budget reconciliation, the same tactic already used by Republicans as the first step to repeal Obamacare. This process allows passage of bills with a simple majority in the Senate, avoiding a Democratic filibuster.

Medicare has vastly improved the lives and health of American seniors, lifting millions out of poverty and expanding life expectancy. Medicare and Medicaid were the last social reforms wrested from the ruling establishment, won in the course of bitter struggles of the working class.

Price’s reactionary views are in line with his membership, until last year, in the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons. AAPS is an ultra-conservative group founded in 1943 to “fight socialized medicine and to fight the government takeover of medicine.”

AAPS opposed the Social Security Act of 1965, which established Medicare and Medicaid, arguing that “the effect of the law is evil and participation in carrying out its provisions is, in our opinion, immoral,” and called for doctors to boycott Medicare. Its web site

currently notes: “We have helped hundreds of doctors opt out of Medicare through information on our web site and our limited legal consultation service.”

The association’s journal has advocated beliefs that HIV does not cause AIDS, that being gay reduces life expectancy, that there is a link between abortion and breast cancer, and that vaccines are associated with autism.

Individuals espousing such anti-scientific and anti-social views are the types being tapped by Trump to populate his administration, along with his fascistic chief adviser, Stephen K. Bannon, and others associated with the “alt-right” Breitbart News. Alongside a lineup of retired generals and billionaires, Trump is assembling the most right-wing cabinet in history, pledged to ride roughshod over democratic and social rights, including the right to free, high-quality health care.



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