



Health care ad cyclorama to clog airwaves

*By Mimi Hall
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WASHINGTON — It's not quite election season, but President Obama is on the stump, pushing his health care bill. Now, millions of dollars in political ads aimed at swaying Congress are hitting the airwaves.

Hundreds of business groups today launch a multimillion-dollar ad campaign in an effort to stop health care legislation and fire back at White House efforts to win support for a plan Obama says would expand insurance coverage to 31 million people.

The bill Obama is pushing Congress to pass by Easter "will cost jobs and stifle any creation of jobs," says Jade West of the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors.

At the same time, the health insurance industry as soon as today will begin airing ads of its own on cable TV networks. Those ads, by America's Health Insurance Plans, aim to blunt White House criticism of insurance companies for raising rates.

"Doctors, hospitals, medicines and tests" drive up health care costs, not insurance companies, the ads say.

The group will not say how much it's spending on the ads beyond that it is at least \$1 million.

The business ads by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and nearly 250 other organizations will air on national cable networks.

In a few days, the ads will directly target members of Congress, airing in 17 states where House members either opposed health care legislation when a version passed the chamber in November or supported it but have suggested they are wavering now, according to Chamber Vice President of Government Affairs Bruce Josten.

The ads warn: "Billions in new taxes. More mandates on businesses. Health care costs will go even higher, making a tough economy worse. Washington's not getting the message. Tell Congress. Stop this health care bill we can't afford to pay."

The Chamber would not list the 17 states in the ad buy. Josten would not say specifically what the business groups are spending on the ads, only that it's between \$4 million and \$10 million.

"This is the endgame when it comes to the legislation," says Evan Tracey of the non-partisan Campaign Media Analysis Group, which tracks political advertising. The ads in the states are "a call to action to make the phone ring" in congressional offices.

The ads come as Obama has ramped up his own efforts to push health care through Congress in the next few weeks.

Today, he heads to the St. Louis suburbs for a reprise of his speech Monday outside of Philadelphia, where he urged Congress to pass his 10-year, \$950 billion bill that also would tighten regulations on insurance companies.

In Pennsylvania, Obama appeared campaign-style in shirt sleeves as he blasted insurers for rate hikes that have left people without coverage or care.

Robert Zirkelbach, spokesman for the health insurance industry group, says Obama's characterization is unfair and that insurers want to set the record straight that health care costs, not insurance rates, are what hurts the system most.

Speaking at an industry conference at The Ritz-Carlton hotel in Washington, while hundreds of union workers and other protesters who support the legislation chanted outside, Zirkelbach called Obama's depiction of the industry "politics as usual."

He said the industry supports health care changes — but not with the bill now before Congress. He says Obama's bill doesn't do enough to drive down health care costs. "It's a missed opportunity," he says.