

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
“The PPACA’s High Risk Pool Regime: High Cost, Low Participation”
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
April 1, 2011

I’ve been involved in congressional oversight for decades, and I’ve seen firsthand how oversight, when done right, can educate and inform the public and make government programs work better. And I’ve also seen how the oversight process can be abused, for no purpose other than to fight ideological battles.

This kind of partisan oversight helps nobody, but it is apparently becoming the norm in this Subcommittee.

Today’s hearing is about the new state and federal pre-existing condition insurance plans, or high-risk pools, established under the Affordable Care Act. These plans are a good example of the immediate benefits provided by the landmark health care reform law. They have allowed thousands of individuals desperately in need of health care coverage to purchase insurance. They have provided an essential lifeline to individuals who were shut out of the market for individual health insurance.

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, discrimination by insurance companies against individuals with pre-existing conditions will be banned. In 2014, everyone will have a wide variety of choices of health care plans through state-based exchanges. Families will receive subsidies to help pay for coverage if they cannot afford it.

Until then, the high-risk pools available in every state will serve as a bridge to these state-based exchanges, allowing individuals with pre-existing conditions to purchase coverage at market-based rates.

You would think Republicans would love this program. In fact, these high-risk pools were the centerpiece of Republican health care reform proposals. Last Congress, Republicans introduced 11 bills creating state-based high-risk pools. One Committee member, Mr. Burgess, an outspoken opponent of the health care reform law, said: “The programs to deal with preexisting conditions would involve risk pools to be sure.” *Politico* has described high-risk pools as one of “the old GOP standbys.”

But when these high-risk pools were included in the health care reform law, suddenly Republican leaders in Congress decided they don't like them anymore.

We have one excellent witness today, Steve Larsen from HHS. He's responsible for administering the program, and I'm glad he's here to share his insights with us. But we asked Chairman Stearns for an additional witness: John Barthell, a constituent of Rep. DeGette's from Colorado who is enrolled in the pre-existing condition insurance program. We wanted to get his perspective on the value of the program. We heard Ms. DeGette read some of his testimony for the record.

This request was denied. Apparently, the Committee does not want to hear from individual Americans who disagree with Republican orthodoxy.

Last week, Committee Republicans put out a memo attacking one part of the law – the Early Retiree Reinsurance Program – for being too popular and having enrollment that is too high. In today's hearing, they will attack the high-risk pools for exactly the opposite reason: they are not popular enough and have too low an enrollment.

The Affordable Care Act is simply not going to get a fair hearing from the Republicans on this Committee.

And that's a shame, because it's a good law. It ends the worst insurance company abuses, helps seniors in Medicare, helps small businesses afford health care coverage, and makes sure that all Americans have access to high-quality, affordable health care coverage. Americans of all ages in all 50 states are already benefitting from the health care reform law.

Our country faces grave challenges. We need to grow our economy and create jobs. We need an energy policy that protects our national security and our environment. We need a health care system that provides quality, affordable coverage to all Americans.

But to achieve these goals, we need to stop these partisan hearings and learn how to work together for the American people.