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Michigan U.S. senators see pressure mount on health care legislation

Senators say they're hearing from individuals as well as religious, social and union groups

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Detroit News Washington Bureau

Washington -- The Michigan Catholic Conference sent an action alert Friday urging supporters to contact their U.S. senators about a "completely unacceptable" provision on abortion funding in the Senate health care bill, an indication of the intense interest in the high-stakes debate.

Other groups asking members to weigh in include the AARP of Michigan and UAW, which support the plan, to Michigan Chamber of Commerce, which stresses, "Keep Pressure on U.S. Senate" to stop the legislation.

"We know that hearing from our members is far more powerful than hearing from us as an organization," said Wendy Block, health policy director at the Michigan Chamber of Commerce.

"Our members are very concerned about how (the health care debate) would affect their bottom lines."

General Motors and Ford Motor Co. said they aren't heavily focused on the health care debate, while Chrysler Group LLC spokeswoman Linda Becker said Chrysler is "engaged" through its involvement with the Corporate Health Care Coalition.

Aides to Sens. Carl Levin, D-Detroit, and Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, say the input from constituents is high.

Stabenow spokeswoman Nkenge Harmon, says her boss is hearing from people through phone calls and e-mails as well as through a section of her congressional Web page called the Health Care People's Lobby.

There, the senator asks people to tell her their stories about health care so "Senator Stabenow can help her colleagues understand the urgency of this situation for families and businesses in Michigan."

Nearly 10,000 constituents have signed up, sharing stories and asking to receive e-mails updating them on the health care package's progress.

"Many share very personal stories," Harmon said. "Cost is a big issue across the board -- for individuals, families and businesses. Another common issue is the fear people have that they will lose their insurance because they have lost their jobs or were cut back from full-time to part-time hours at work."

Levin press secretary Tara Andringa also reports a high level of interest in health care, "ranging from the public option to the costs of various proposals."

Dave Maluchnik, spokesman for the Michigan Catholic Conference, said members of its Web-based

advocacy network have expressed a lot of interest in the battle being waged by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, to keep tough restrictions on abortion funding in the final bill.

"We received more feedback from that action alert than other ones," said Maluchnik, adding "several hundred" Catholics sent e-mails from the Web site to keep the restrictive Stupak language.

Unlike many groups that weigh in pro or con, the Michigan Catholic Conference wants a health care overhaul, but with the Stupak anti-abortion funding language.

"The Bishops are supporters of overall health care reform to ensure coverage for the poor and low-income population, and that reform doesn't harm immigrants," Maluchnik said.

Meanwhile, 58,955 AARP Michigan members have sent Michigan lawmakers e-mails from the Web site of the group for older Americans, asking them to support the legislation, which helps close the "doughnut hole" in which seniors have to pay for some of their prescription drugs.

Leaders of the group, along with Michigan Nurses Association and the Michigan Citizen Action, appeared on panels to help answer questions at four town halls with Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, after the House passed its health care bill Nov. 7.

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