

EDITORIAL

How Congress can move forward after Graham-Cassidy

The obsession with ending Obamacare threatens vital health programs.

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Scenic Rivers Health Services (<http://www.scenicrivershealthservices.org/index.php>) serves 8,000 square miles of northern Minnesota — an area almost the size of New Jersey. Regrettably, its patients may be among the first to pay the price for the nine months that congressional Republicans spent obsessing over an Affordable Care Act repeal instead of tending to other important responsibilities.

The ill-fated quest ending former President Barack Obama's health care law — an effort that met another deserved dead end as the Graham-Cassidy bill stalled on Tuesday — left little time for other critical work. Reauthorizing dollars for a vital federal trust fund that supports Scenic Rivers and about 1,400 other community health centers, whose mission is providing care in medically underserved areas, is one of these tasks left undone. So is reauthorizing funding for another vital medical program for low-income families — the Children's Health Insurance Program (<http://www.startribune.com/another-cliff-for-congress-minnesota-the-children-s-health-insurance-program/445496073/>) (CHIP).

Congress still has time to extend funding for both, which has been routine in the past, but the window is closing by the hour. Saturday is the deadline. If lawmakers do not, the consequences will be severe, including an immediate 70 percent cut in funding to the health centers, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers (<http://www.nachc.org/>) (NACHC).

Minnesota has 17 of these federally qualified centers with 70 sites throughout the state. The cut would hurt some centers more than others, with some clinics taking a 15 percent revenue reduction while others suffer up to a 60 percent hit, according to the Minnesota Association of Community Health Centers (<http://www.mnachc.org/>).

Scenic Rivers is part of the state's community health center network, with medical clinics in six towns: Northome, Floodwood, Cook, Bigfork, Tower and Big Falls. Scenic Rivers CEO Mike Holmes is increasingly concerned about the federal funding. While he remains hopeful that Congress will act in time, Holmes has been forced to consider his options.

"If we lose the money, there would be no way for us to continue operations but with reductions in both sites and services," he said Wednesday. Holmes, who noted that the clinics are often the only providers for miles around, emphasized that the doors will be open no matter what on Monday.

The federal dollars are especially critical to community health centers because their patients include many low-income families, the elderly and others who still are without insurance. The health centers, which have served urban and rural areas since the mid-1960s (<http://www.nachc.org/about-our-health-centers/>), are located in 9,800 U.S. communities and provide care to more than 27 million Americans.

The centers received a big funding boost to expand services — \$11 billion over five years — with the creation of a Health Centers Fund under the 2010 ACA. It is dollars for this fund that need swift approval. With bipartisan support, Congress approved a two-year extension in 2015, providing \$3.6 billion a year, according to the NACHC.

It's also unthinkable that Congress would fail to reauthorize CHIP, which has long enjoyed broad bipartisan support because it serves vulnerable children. Minnesota Department of Human Services Commissioner Emily Piper urged Congress to act before Sept. 30 in a recent commentary (<http://www.startribune.com/another-cliff-for-congress-minnesota-the-children-s-health-insurance-program/445496073/>) on these pages.



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As Congress weighs its next steps after Graham-Cassidy's setback, it's time to stabilize the ACA and then move forward. Other critical work has piled up, and there are unacceptable consequences for ignoring it. People who get their care in Northome, Cook and other small towns shouldn't have their access to care compromised because lawmakers can't get their work done on time.
