

NEWS 10

California's mixed signals on entitlements

By Paul Barton

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WASHINGTON - When a bipartisan mix of 100 House members recently urged the deficit-reduction supercommittee to search for cuts in all federal spending, including entitlements, the California delegation didn't show much enthusiasm.

Only six of the delegation's 53 members signed the letter to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction: Democratic Reps. Mike Thompson, Adam Schiff, Dennis Cardoza, Jim Costa, John Garamendi and Republican Rep. Devin Nunes.

It followed renewed calls from House Speaker John Boehner to address the major entitlements: Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Reaction since then has highlighted a split in how these programs are viewed: Protecting Medicare and Social Security is far more urgent with many lawmakers than standing guard over Medicaid.

But that's not the case with Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento. She wants all three protected.

"As the supercommittee considers policy options to reduce our nation's deficit, it is critical that the members of the committee understand the full weight of their proposals," Matsui, who serves as co-chair of the Congressional Seniors Task Force, said in a statement.

"That is why I firmly reject the premise that we must undermine our nation's social safety net in order to reduce the deficit Programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security are making the difference in the lives of my constituents -- and millions of Americans -- all across the country. We must stand-up for those who have paid their fair share and played by the rules their entire life by making good on the promise of a safe and secure retirement, and access to high-quality, affordable health care."

On the other side stands someone like Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs, who said Medicaid is the one program she is willing to cut.

"With the economy continuing to struggle, Congresswoman Bono Mack believes it's more important than ever to take a close look at all federal spending and then establish clear national priorities," said her spokesman, Ken Johnson. "The Congresswoman does not support any cuts to Social Security and Medicare benefits at this time, but Medicaid is certainly one area that should be looked at because of widespread waste, fraud and abuse which has occurred in the past."

Medicaid is the federal-state health care program for the poor, especially women and children and elderly in nursing homes.

Advocacy groups say Bono Mack's willingness to cut Medicaid but not Medicare or Social Security reflects a long-held sentiment.

While Social Security and Medicare have long been the third rail of politics -- politicians who touch them risk defeat -- there's not as much worry about the reaction of low-income Medicaid constituents, who are often less politically organized.

"A lot of of members are not aware of how vital Medicaid is for their constituents," said Ron

Pollack, head of Families USA, an advocacy group on social-welfare programs.

Medi-Cal, the California version of Medicaid, has 316,277 beneficiaries in Sacramento County and 7.4 million statewide. In contrast, Sacramento County Medicare and Social Security recipients number 171,739 and 201,200 respectively, according to the latest federal statistics.

And as for Bono Mack's waste and abuse charge, Pollack said: "It is pure sloganeering on her part. There is waste and abuse in everything."

Nina Owcharenko, a health expert with the conservative Heritage Foundation, agreed that there is waste in all of the entitlement programs. But, she added: "Waste, fraud and abuse are only going to get you so far with both Medicaid and Medicare."

Still, Bono Mack is far from the only California members to leave out Medicaid when stressing which programs to protect.

For instance, Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, signed a letter from the House Appropriations Committee to the supercommittee that also urged scrutiny of entitlements.

"Congressman Lewis has always believed that it is impossible to resolve the problem of increasing federal deficits without reforming entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security," spokesman Jim Specht said. "He is adamantly opposed to cuts in benefits for current recipients, however."

Lewis made no such vow about Medicaid recipients.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Rancho Mirage, wants a "balanced approach between cuts and revenues" when it comes to deficit reduction, spokesman Zachary Coile said.

"She opposes efforts to slash Medicare and Social Security benefits for our seniors, but supports strengthening those very successful programs so that they continue to benefit future generations."

Boxer's spokesman, too, said nothing of Medicaid.

And Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, didn't mention Medicaid either but said, "Before we look to slashing Social Security and Medicare, we have to look at cutting defense spending and closing tax loopholes that assure that corporations and the wealthiest 1 percent pay their fair share."

Nunes, R-Tulare, said Medicaid, like Medicare and Social Security, can be made to work "more efficiently and more effectively."

If nothing is done, he said, all three programs will experience massive benefit cuts because current spending can't be sustained.

"My goal is to ensure we have a strong safety net for all of our citizens," he said.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, recently joined a group of 44 senators who wrote a letter also urging the supercommittee "to go big" in searching for deficit-reduction solutions. It said they should include "long-term entitlement reform" but did not mention particular programs.