

Obamacare author Stuart Altman speaks in Worcester



Stuart Altman, second from right, Obamacare author and professor of National Health Policy at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, speaks with, from left, John McMorrow of the Worcester Economic Club, Gayle Flanders Weiss of the Unum US Law Department, and David Przesiek of Fallon Community Health Plan during Thursday's Worcester Economic Club meeting. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

By Mark Sullivan, CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — As lawmakers in Washington on Wednesday announced a deal to avert a national-debt default and to reopen the federal government, one of the architects of Obamacare, here to address the Worcester Economic Club, described himself as “flabbergasted” at the “vehemence” of opponents whose efforts to de-fund the sweeping health law led to the government shutdown.

“I’m pleased to see that saner heads prevailed and that it looks like the government will reopen tomorrow or the next day, and that we will not become the laughingstock of the world in terms of failure to pay our bills,” said Stuart Altman, the Sol C. Chaikin Professor of National Health Policy at Brandeis, and chairman of Massachusetts’ Health Policy Commission.

Mr. Altman spoke with the Telegram & Gazette before addressing a dinner of the Worcester Economic Club at the College of the Holy Cross that was attended by more than 180 local businesspeople.

An economist who researches federal health policy, Mr. Altman helped design what came to be known as Obamacare as a member of the health policy team for Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

"I'm sort of flabbergasted by the negative reactions we're getting (to Obamacare)," he said. "I knew that some people would be against it — some people are against anything. There is a segment of the population that really doesn't believe, A, government should be in any way involved, and B, that the people who would be getting subsidized or getting expanded Medicaid shouldn't be able to get it. They have this libertarian view about, you know, if you can't afford it, you can't have health insurance. I'm not saying they're heartless — they say, well, we can provide some level of care, we already do, but that's all you get.

"I anticipated some degree of hostility, but I've been continuously surprised and shocked by the vehemence by the anti-Obamacare (forces). I have to believe it's a lot of issues rolled up together. So this vehemence is what caused the government shutdown. I'm very pleased that Obama maintained his position that was not going to, A, negotiate away any major part of the law, and B, that he was not going to negotiate with them at all."

Mr. Altman was asked about the technical problems that have beset the rollout of the online health insurance exchanges and made it difficult for many people to sign up.

"I'm not a techie," he said, "but it doesn't surprise me. ... We often over-expect technology to do more things than (it is) capable of. When the law was passed, it was not anticipated that the federal government would be required to run so many exchanges. The hope was to design them at the state level. For example we didn't have any technical difficulties — a few, I shouldn't say none — in Massachusetts. Now we had problems when we first started the (Health) Connector but it got worked out. Most of the states that are running their own exchanges are now functioning. Some of them are functioning quite well.

"What happened at the federal level is unfortunate. I wish it didn't happen," Mr. Altman said. "They have been overwhelmed. My sense is the political hostility to the law has affected everything. I mean, it's prevented the administration from getting adequate funding — my understanding is, the contracts that were ultimately signed for the firms that were doing these exchanges, were almost a year late, because the administration didn't have adequate funding. What happened is, everything got backed up — the people who were doing the technical work haven't finished it, and so we're having this problem. But you know, it's something that will get worked out: it is technical, not what I would call ideological or philosophical. This stuff is going to get worked out."

As chairman of Massachusetts' Health Policy Commission, Mr. Altman is charged with helping keep health care costs in the commonwealth from increasing faster than those of other goods and services. In his remarks to the Worcester Economic Club, he said he planned to outline how efforts to contain health care costs at the state level will benefit businesspeople.

“For many years, businesses, and particularly small businesses, have been asked to become indirectly the financing arm for the uninsured,” Mr. Altman said. “What was happening was, the uninsured were still getting care when they needed it, because the hospitals and doctors were providing it, and then (insurance companies) were turning around and increasing the cost of private insurance. Essentially the business community became a hidden tax collector.

“People say, ‘Well, covering the uninsured costs businesses more.’ The reality is that often not covering the uninsured costs businesses even more.

“It took us a few years after we passed our health reform in Massachusetts, but now we’re beginning to see premium growth being reduced, as well as overall spending,” Mr. Altman said. “More of the cost-containment needs to be at the state level, because, in fact, it is just unfair and really anti-business to ask the business community to be responsible for covering so much of the cost.”

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