

## Schwarzenegger to press universal health insurance

by Reuters-News

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Tuesday vowed to continue pressing for legislation that would provide health insurance to his state's uninsured, a day after a universal health care bill he supported died in a Senate committee.

Lawmakers had missed a golden opportunity for California to show the rest of the United States how to establish universal health care, Schwarzenegger said in a speech to the press club of the state capital.

"I'm as determined as ever," Schwarzenegger said. "The issue is not going to go away."

The bill had been closely watched across the United States because of California's size -- it is the largest state in the U.S. -- and the rising anxiety among Americans about the spiraling cost and lack of availability of affordable health care.

Nearly 47 million Americans, or 16 percent of the population, were without health insurance in 2005, according to the National Coalition on Health Care.

Health care has become a major issue in the presidential campaign, with leading candidates acknowledging that changes are needed, and some advocating plans to expand coverage.

Schwarzenegger, a Republican, and state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, a Democrat, brokered the bill that would have given Californians without medical insurance some level of coverage by requiring they obtain it individually, through employers or via a state program.

The Democrat-led Assembly endorsed the legislation but on Monday the health committee of the Senate, which also has a Democratic majority, voted it down 7-1.

### COMPLEX AND COSTLY

Top Senate Democrats joined with Republicans in opposing the legislation's complexity and projected cost of more than \$14 billion to help establish a fund subsidizing medical insurance for more than 5 million uninsured Californians.

The program would have relied on tobacco taxes and fees on employers and hospitals to raise the funds needed.

Opposition to the bill grew after a report last week by the state's budget watchdog warned the scheme could cost the already cash-strapped state much more than supporters claimed.

California faces a budget shortfall in its current and upcoming fiscal years of more than \$14 billion as revenues slow with the cooling economy and slumping housing markets.

Schwarzenegger said he would approach a renewed push for a universal health care bill as a marathon and ruled out incremental changes in California's medical system.

One of his aides, Daniel Zingale, told Reuters the Senate's health committee should have looked beyond concerns about the cost of universal health care. But he acknowledged the state's financial woes and said concern about a possible recession proved difficult to overcome.

"People tend to get anxious about change in times of uncertainty," Zingale said.

Nunez told a news conference he was disappointed by the committee vote but it would not deter him from seeking to overhaul the state's health insurance system and provide coverage to the uninsured.

"We're going to continue to embrace this kind of reform," he said.

-----By Jim Christie

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