

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Obama Denounces Waste In Govt. Health Care

ST. CHARLES, Mo. (AP) — President Barack Obama denounced waste, inefficiency and downright fraud in the government's health care system Wednesday as he sought to rally public support for his revamped overhaul plan.

"Improper payments cost taxpayers almost \$100 billion last year alone," Obama said at a rally in this St. Louis suburb.

He said such payments amounted to more than is spent on the Education Department and the Small Business Administration combined, and that if there was a "Department of Improper Payments" it would be "one of the largest agencies in the government."

The president came to Missouri as an installment in presenting a closing argument on his health care overhaul. He says inaction would hurt Americans. It was his second health care speech outside Washington in a week.

Obama cited abuses in the government-run Medicare and Medicaid and in other federal health care programs, citing "payments sent to the wrong person, sent for the wrong reason, sent in the wrong amount."

WWII 'WASPs' Net Congressional Gold Medal

WASHINGTON (AP) — They flew planes during World War II but weren't considered "real" military pilots. No flags were draped over their coffins when they died on duty. And when their service ended, they had to pay their own bus fare home.

These aviators — all women — got long-overdue recognition on Wednesday. They received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor given by Congress, in a ceremony on Capitol Hill.

About 200 women who served as Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, were on hand to receive the award. Now mostly in their late 80s and early 90s, some came in wheelchairs, many sported dark blue uniforms, and one, June Bent of Westboro, Mass., clutched a framed photograph of a comrade who had died.

As a military band played "The Star-Spangled Banner," one of the women who had been sitting in a wheelchair stood up and saluted through the entire song as a relative gently supported her back.

"Women Airforce Service Pilots, we are all your daughters; you taught us how to fly," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to serve as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. She said the pilots went unrecognized for too long, even though their service blazed a trail for other women in the U.S. military.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM

Pelosi: Dems Closer On Agreement

BY DAVID ESPINO AND PHILIP ELLIOTT
Associated Press Writers

ST. CHARLES, Mo. — Democrats claimed momentum Wednesday in their drive to enact the sweeping health care legislation sought by President Barack Obama, citing near agreement on crucial issues despite persistent Republican efforts to knock them off stride.

Obama himself, rallying support outside Washington for the second time this week, shouted to a crowd in Missouri, "The time for talk is over. It's time to vote."

At the Capitol, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that after days of secretive talks, key Democrats were "pretty close" to accord on additional subsidies to help lower-income families purchase insurance, more aid for states under the Medicaid program for low-income Americans and additional help for seniors who face a coverage gap under current Medicare drug plans.

Pelosi, D-Calif., offered no details, and other officials cautioned that any final deal would hinge on cost estimates under preparation at the Congressional Budget Office. Pelosi said as she left the Capitol late Wednesday that the unresolved issues were mostly "minor, just technical things." She and other leaders planned to brief rank-and-file lawmakers Thursday morning.



J.B. FORBES/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/MCT Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) gives the thumbs up to President Barack Obama after he spoke at St. Charles High School about healthcare reform in St. Charles, Missouri on Wednesday.

and Pelosi said she hoped the remaining issues could be largely resolved then.

House Budget Committee Chairman John Spratt, D-S.C., said legislation that embodies the agreements among congressional Democrats and the president could move through his panel next week.

At stake is the fate of Obama's call to expand health care to some 30 million people who lack insurance and to ban insurance company practices such as denial of coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions. He also hopes to begin to reduce the rise in the cost of health care nationally.

are working on a complex rescue mission for the health care legislation that appeared on the cusp of passage late last year, before Senate Republicans gained the strength to sustain a filibuster that could prevent final passage.

The current hope of the White House and Democratic leaders is for the House to approve last year's Senate-passed bill, despite serious objections to numerous provisions. Both houses would then pass a second bill immediately, making changes in the first measure before both could take effect. The second bill would be debated under rules that bar a filibuster, meaning it could clear by majority vote and without Democrats needing to amass a 60-vote supermajority that is beyond their reach.

Republicans have vowed to do everything they can to thwart the plan, and to go after Democratic supporters in next fall's midterm elections. In the Senate, the GOP rank and file issued a letter pledging to strip out any provision that does not adhere scrupulously to complex rules.

In addition, GOP leaders sought to stoke the fears of House Democrats who worried that the Senate would not approve the second bill. Even so, Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., the second-ranking Senate GOP leader, conceded, "We can't delay a bill for months. We might delay it for a few hours."

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