

# Feds are re-litigating state’s health care waivers

For a group that says it wants to increase healthcare access for all, the Biden administration has spent much of its early months in office trying to stymie reforms in Georgia.

Now, I’m sure that isn’t how the feds would describe their actions. But it’s the practical effect of working to block changes today, in hopes the state might do tomorrow what it declined to do yesterday.

I refer to the Biden administration’s twin moves – the most recent of which came this past Thursday – to block Gov. Brian Kemp from implementing the healthcare “waivers” approved just last year by the Trump administration. The maneuvers are based on some dodgy rationale.

First, back in February, Georgia learned its approved plan to create new access to Medicaid for some lower-income workers was in jeopardy of being un-approved.

You may recall that plan was to allow some Georgians who earn less than the poverty level (this year, that’s \$12,880 for an individual) to gain health insurance via Medicaid. To be eligible, applicants would have a job or meet another qualification, such as job training or volunteer work. Roughly 50,000 people were expected to gain coverage.

Instead, the Biden administration wants Georgia to accept Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare, and is holding up the agreement. The main justification offered was that the pandemic made it harder for Georgians to find work. Never mind that Georgia’s unemployment rate has fallen steadily and, at 4.3%, is now less than a percentage point higher than before the pandemic.

Then, this past week, another pillar of Georgia’s proposed healthcare reform was thrown into doubt.

This wavering waiver relates directly to Obamacare. Kemp had obtained approval to remove Georgia from the federally run health-insurance exchange and instead allow Georgians to shop for subsidized plans from a variety of private brokers and websites. This would put more options before consumers, including some non-subsidized plans that might be more affordable than subsidized ones. (A second part of the waiver, to subsidize the care of the sickest and costliest patients through a program known as reinsurance, was unaffected and remains on track.)

Again, the justifications for the Biden administration’s sudden change are questionable. For starters, there’s the assertion that enrollment by Georgians on the federal exchange was 11% higher for the 2021 plan year than for 2020. While true, that figure masks the fact that the increase was wholly due to a higher rate of re-enrollment by people who had previously bought plans on the exchange; the number of new consumers enrolling actually declined for the fifth time in six years. So it’s not clear that HealthCare.gov is attracting more applicants. Another explanation is that the population that needs or wants these plans has simply stabilized.

The feds also point to data from a special, Covid-related enrollment period this Spring, when more than 67,000 Georgians bought new plans. It’s possible that this higher enrollment reflects a greater appeal of plans that now offer more generous taxpayer subsidies because of the latest Covid relief bill.

But there are two problems with that. First, the new subsidies last only two years, whereas Georgia’s waiver would have lasted five. What’s more, the new subsidies may attract some additional buyers in the short term, but soon enough they’re likely to discover the same problem encountered by many consumers on HealthCare.gov: Their premiums are cheaper on the front end, but in many cases their out-of-pocket costs are too high to make the plans worthwhile. That’s one of many remaining structural problems with the Obamacare plans, which Georgia’s waiver would have addressed by presenting consumers with a wider range of options.

The Kemp administration still has an opportunity to present evidence its waivers should move forward after all. But it’d be a lot better if the state and the feds could focus on the future, not re-litigating the past.

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Public Policy  
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# Protecting the international order

We don’t often think that how the U.S. conducts itself at home has much impact on how we face the world, but it does. You’d be amazed at how closely people in countries all over the globe follow events here and count on the United States to lead the way. When it’s messy at home, it’s hard to sustain the strength and readiness to turn our attention outward.

Doing so is especially important right now because what we’ve come to term “the international order” is under stress. It’s not collapsing by any means, but U.S. leadership faces challenges, and if we’re divided and unsettled at home, it will be much more difficult to respond appropriately.

What is the international order? It’s essentially the set of structures and values that evolved during the 20th century to resolve disputes, promote commerce and free trade, undergird economic development and investment, further contacts and exchanges between nations and their citizens, and protect human rights. It’s based on mutually negotiated rules and initiatives that, in a well-functioning world, are promoted by institutions such as the UN, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, and others.

These days, though, it’s fair to say that there’s no aspect of the order we once took for granted that isn’t at least facing questions. This is in part because, at the

moment, both China and Russia are asserting their interests and, often, working actively to undermine ours. At the same time, the U.S. role is less prominent than it once was. Our allies, especially after the

four years of the Trump administration, are uncertain of our commitment to global leadership given that we questioned longtime alliances, withdrew from institutions, pulled out of international accords, and in general pulled back from the web of alliances and agreements that we had helped shape in earlier years. Understandably, our friends and allies wonder how much they can count on us and our adversaries are eager to test us.

At the same time, forces beyond the control of any government are reshaping the global picture. Nationalism is stronger, conflicts between countries seem to be ratcheting up, and many societies are struggling with growing diversity, declining tolerance, and a turn toward authoritarianism. On the whole, international power is less concentrated and more widely distributed, which presents challenges to global institutions and makes it more difficult to pursue much-needed reforms within them.

In this situation, it’s crucial that democracies such as the U.S., Europe, Japan, and Canada recognize the importance of the role they play in sustaining and revitalizing the international order. It’s by no means a given that it can

endure, but the democracies have an advantage: for many people around the world, the more authoritarian alternatives are not especially appealing.

Even so, the work of strengthening the world order will require a concerted effort that blends both cooperation and firmness. We have to strengthen our alliances of course, as well as shore up and broaden arms control efforts. Countering authoritarianism in all its facets will be an ongoing challenge. And we need constantly to gauge how best to be a benign world power, helping to resolve conflicts and slow to use force — not ruling it out, but relying on it wisely and only when necessary.

Finally, as I suggested at the beginning, our strength on all these fronts will come from making sure that we are strong at home: that our economy is robust, our finances and debt are manageable, our elections are fair and well run, our infrastructure is revitalized, we invest in the future of our businesses through R&D, and we invest in the future of the American people by focusing attention on education and skills development. If we can do all that, then we will have earned the right to lead the world in navigating the challenges facing the international order.

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Dick Yarbrough pauses this week for a vacation. His weekly column will return next week.



Guest Editorial  
Lee Hamilton

# Another reason I’m thankful for real teachers

When my children were younger, in this very space, I detailed how I attempted to teach them how to tell time.

I failed – miserably. Thank God for teachers.

My children are older now. They know how to tell time. Other things, they don’t know.

“Hey, can you turn it to 101.9, please,” my youngest son requested on our way out of town recently, obviously tired of the cool song stylings of the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ playlist from my phone.

His favorite radio station at home is 101.9, apparently.

“Son, we’re about 90 miles from home now,” I explained. “I doubt we can pick it up.”

Half a minute later – “Huh?”

I turned to 101.9. Nothing but static.

“See, you can’t hear it,” I said, peering into the rear-view mirror to see if he recognized my attempt. He didn’t. Instead, he looked straight ahead with a familiar glazed expression.

An hour later, I was listening to the cool song stylings of Steely Dan when a distur-



Len’s Lines  
Len Robbins

bance from behind interrupted my fern bar experience.

“Hey, Dad, can you turn it to 101.9, please?”

I turned down “Deacon Blues” to deliver the news.

“Son, we’re 150 miles from home. We can’t pick up that station,” I said.

Fifteen seconds later – “Huh?”

“Let me explain something,” I began. “Radio stations have frequencies that travel a certain distance. Once you go past that dis-

tance, you can’t pick up those stations any longer, unless you have satellite radio or something.”

“Why don’t we have satellite radio, then?,” he asked.

“Because the satellite radio subscription that came with this car expired, and I’m too poor or dumb to renew it. Probably both,” I replied.

I peered into the mirror to see if my son was listening to my explanation, and understood the concept of radio frequencies. He was asleep.

An hour later, he was up again, and decided to get chatty. This interrupted my enjoyment of the cool song stylings of the Beastie Boys (RIP, MCA).

“Hey, Dad, can you turn it to 101.9 now?,” he inquired.

“Weren’t you listening to me earlier? You can’t pick up 101.9 here...” Before I could finish my explanation, or listen to the stirring ending of “Egg Man,” he had moved the radio dial to 101.9 – from the backseat. How? I don’t know.

“What do you mean? It’s on 101.9 now,” he said, tuning in to Freddie Fender’s “Wasted Days and Wasted

Nights.” I took another stab at a teaching moment.

“No, son, see, this isn’t the 101.9 you are used to hearing. It’s another station that is using that frequency. As I explained earlier, radio stations have frequencies that travel a certain distance. Once you go past that . . .”

The confusion had already set in as he interrupted me with “Huh?”

We were 30 minutes away from the freaking fun park when he awoke from his radio-frequency-lecture-inspired nap. I wasn’t enjoying the cool song stylings of Men Without Hats.

“Hey, can you try 101.9 again? Maybe that static will be gone now.”

“Son, I don’t think you understand,” I started. “Listen closely. There are towers that rise into the sky that . . .”

My wife touched my arm. “We’re almost there!,” she said excitedly, saving herself from witnessing failure once more.

Again, thank God for teachers. They do teach about radio technology in high school, don’t they?

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# Letters to the Editor are always welcome

The Donalsonville News reminds letter to the editor writers that shorter is better. Concise letters are not only better read, they are more likely to be published because limited space is available. Almost any point can be made in 350 words or fewer, so this is set as an upper level for length.

Unsigned letters, letters signed with a fictitious signature, copies of letters sent to public officials, or letters containing unverified or anonymous quotes will not be accepted.

We limit letters on a subject when we feel it has been thoroughly aired to the point of letters becoming repetitive. Also rejected are letters that are libelous, in bad taste, or are personal attacks on individuals or private businesses.

Writers must include addresses and telephone numbers. These are for identification purposes only, and will not be published.

Send letters to the editor to P.O. Box 338, Donalsonville, Georgia 39845

