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Congress Considers Improving Benefits, but Costs Pose Concerns

By Stephen Barr

Tuesday, June 22, 2004; Page B02

Congress is taking steps that could lead to improved dental, vision and hearing benefits for federal employees and retirees.

The House yesterday approved, on a voice vote, a bill that would require the Office of Personnel Management to study and evaluate options that could increase insurance coverage for dental, vision and hearing benefits for enrollees in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. Under the bill, OPM would have six months to present the study to Congress.

Legislation to address dental benefits also is being drafted in the Senate. Republican and Democratic staff aides with the Governmental Affairs Committee are working on a proposal that could be introduced soon.

The House bill was sponsored by Rep. Jo Ann S. Davis (R-Va.), chairman of the House civil service subcommittee, with support from Reps. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) and Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.).

Although the House bill only calls for a study, it marks the first time in years that members of Congress have agreed to consider enhancing dental and vision benefits.

According to a House Government Reform Committee report accompanying the bill, "other health benefits, such as contraceptives, mental health aid and long-term care insurance, have been added to the FEHBP. Today, an overwhelming majority of private-sector plans provide dental and vision coverage. In addition, according to focus groups and a recent survey conducted by OPM, federal employees and annuitants desire better dental, vision and hearing care coverage more than any other benefits."

A key issue facing Congress is how to finance improved benefits, congressional aides and lobbyists said. One idea under consideration is to offer dental and vision benefits through a supplemental program, such as Congress did when it created the long-term care insurance program, where enrollees pay premiums in full. That would maintain existing dental and vision coverage while giving employees the option of improved benefits.

The cost of providing additional benefits has been a concern at OPM. According to testimony at a House hearing in February, OPM froze dental and vision benefits about 1987 because it believed any coverage improvements should focus on hospital, surgical and other key medical benefits. OPM, in general, also has tried to avoid adding benefits to FEHBP that would increase premium costs.

The House bill would require OPM to describe current dental, vision and hearing coverage provided

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through FEHBP, a description of supplemental plans offered by insurance companies in FEHBP, an assessment of how to provide enhanced benefits and the estimated cost of any changes.

Jo Ann Davis has faulted the government for providing meager dental benefits. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), chairman of the Governmental Affairs Committee, also thinks that improved dental benefits are long overdue for federal employees.

Collins "is currently working toward a bipartisan approach that will provide federal employees with meaningful dental options," a spokeswoman said.

Taking Aim at the Pentagon

Rep. Jay Inslee (D-Wash.) said he plans to offer an amendment today to the fiscal 2005 defense spending bill that would stop the Pentagon from modifying employee and union rights when the Defense Department adopts a new civilian personnel system.

The Pentagon plans to create a National Security Personnel System aimed at streamlining civil service rules and more closely linking employee pay to job performance. Unions balked at some of the initial proposals, and the Pentagon agreed to go back to the drawing board.

But Inslee said he fears the proposed system would create "politically driven" employees and undermine decades of statutory protections afforded civil service workers. He said the Pentagon has not offered examples of why changes in work rules are needed, noting that Navy employees in his district are working overtime to maintain ships and have accepted reassignments to help fight against terrorism.

Diary Live

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