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## **Obama presses message on health care**

**In College Park, president calls health insurance reform a 'defining struggle of this generation'**

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COLLEGE PARK

President Barack Obama sought to harness the energy of his youthful supporters to the Democratic push for health care change, rallying a largely student crowd Thursday at the University of Maryland, College Park.

An earsplitting roar greeted the president when he entered the Comcast Center, coatless and with sleeves rolled up. It was the first campus stop on Obama's campaign-style health care tour, and he tailored his stump speech for the university audience.

Obama noted that, under the plan he favors, young people who are covered under their parents' health insurance plans could retain that coverage until they turn 26. Many plans currently end coverage for dependent children once they graduate from college.

The president compared the drive to overhaul the health care system to earlier fights, including those for civil rights, female suffrage, Social Security and Medicare — as well as his 2008 candidacy for president, calling health insurance reform a "defining struggle of this generation."

"It begins on campuses like this one," Obama said. "Just like the change that began in our campaign, it starts with people, especially young people, who are determined to take this nation's destiny into their own hands."

At one point, Obama's remarks were interrupted by a long-haired anti-abortion heckler who stood near the back of the arena and shouted until he was escorted out by security personnel.

Obama tried, as he has in other recent speeches, to emphasize his willingness to work across party lines to fashion an overhaul plan, including on the issue of medical liability.

And while he deplored the partisan rancor in Washington that turns off many Americans, he drew loud cheers when he said he "will not waste time with those who made the calculation that it's better to kill health reform than to improve our system."

At another point, he lashed out at critics who engage in "scare tactics instead of honest debate."

"I've heard a lot of Republicans say they want to kill Obamacare. Some may even raise money off of it," he said. "But when you ask these folks what exactly my plan does, they've got it all wrong. When you ask them what their solution is, it amounts to the same old, same old. ... It's more of the same."

An array of top elected Democrats were on hand, including Gov. Martin O'Malley and every Democratic member of the state's congressional delegation except Rep. Frank Kratovil, whose district voted heavily for Republican John McCain last fall. An aide said Kratovil had two committee hearings to attend instead.

Obama, making his first public appearance in the state as president other than a commencement speech at the Naval Academy in May, appeared to mangle references to two of Maryland's more elaborately named politicians. During the ritual introduction of elected officials in the crowd, Obama referred to state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, Jr., as "Tom" and Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppensberger as "Butch."

The president's speech, which began shortly before noon, lasted just over half an hour. He was back at the White House soon afterward.

Shortly before he spoke, the administration said it will soon begin a demonstration project that would pay states up to \$3 million over three years to test ways of reducing "frivolous lawsuits" for medical malpractice and lowering the liability premiums paid by doctors.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sibelius, in announcing the plan that Obama unveiled in his speech to Congress last week, also said the administration would award the grants early next year. The total amount available under the program is \$25 million.

"The cost of insurance continues to be one of the highest practice expenses for some specialties. And although malpractice premiums do not account for a large percentage of total medical costs, many physicians report that fear of lawsuits leads them to practice defensive medicine, which may contribute to higher costs," Obama said in a memorandum to Sibelius, released Thursday by the White House.

Obama made medical liability part of his health care plan, as a way of showing that he was interested in reaching out to Republicans. But proponents of curbing malpractice lawsuits have criticized the president for failing to endorse the idea of capping jury awards for pain and suffering.

We should explore medical liability reform as one way to improve the quality of care and patient-safety practices and to reduce defensive medicine. But whatever steps we pursue, medical liability reform must be just one part of broader health insurance reform," the Obama memo states.

The rally, and the flurry of activity around malpractice, came one day after the Senate Finance committee chairman unveiled new health care legislation that is the first to meet Obama's goal of keeping the plan from adding to the federal deficit.

A crowd of more than 10,000 chanted Obama's "Yes, we can!" campaign slogan after a warm-up speaker, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, urged them to get behind the president's push to gain approval by Congress for his plan.

"President Obama needs your help," Locke said. "You can make a difference in this health care debate and you can make a difference now. Please talk to your friends, your neighbors, your members of Congress."

Said Locke, "These opportunities come once in a generation and at this moment, we are closer than we have ever been before to building a health care system that America can be proud of."

The Comcast Center, with a capacity of 18,000, was about three-quarters filled for the event, despite an extensive effort by the state and national Democratic parties, and Obama's former campaign organization, to fill the hall.

The crowd was overwhelmingly composed of students, many of whom began lining up in the predawn hours.

"Obama's trying to do a great thing," said Syrus Nourbakhsh, 18, of Highland, who found hundreds of people ahead of him at 5:30 a.m. "He's trying to get the students' support, because that was his main base in the election."

Polls show that those under 30 are less likely than older Americans to be paying attention to the health care debate. That may have hindered Obama's efforts to generate more public approval for his plan in opinion polls, even though younger voters supported him more heavily than any other age group in the 2008 election.

In an effort to draw students into the issue, the White House set up a live online video stream of the campus event through a social-networking application designed to let Facebook users watch and comment on the speech as Obama was speaking.

Several hours prior to the president's appearance, former Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich criticized Obama's health care effort during a rambling conference call sponsored by the Republican National Committee.

Ehrlich, now the host of a weekly radio talk show, said the president finds himself "in a difficult situation": the public hasn't rallied in overwhelming numbers behind his health care plan and "he has to placate his left wing," which is unhappy because Obama is willing to sacrifice a public option in the interest of getting legislation through Congress that he can sign.

"It's the reason for the road show. It's the reason he's in Maryland today," said Ehrlich.

The former governor drew only one question from reporters, which dealt with his 2010 plans. Ehrlich, who has a fund-raising event scheduled soon, said he hasn't ruled out a possible run, presumably for his old job, but hasn't got a timeline for making a decision.

"Events occur. Life unfolds," Ehrlich said. "It's certainly something that we're looking at."

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