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Wiener revives California's single-payer health care debate

The bill would require the state to start talking to federal officials about getting permission for CalCare.

BY: **RACHEL BLUTH** | 03/21/2023 08:00 AM EDT



One school of thought, championed by nurses, is that a policy bill has to be passed and signed before the feds can get involved. | Mario Tama/Getty Images

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — State Sen. Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco) has introduced a bill to set California on the path to single-payer health care.

Why it matters: Wiener and other supporters say the bill, which would direct the state to start getting input from the federal government, works in tandem with a policy bill that's already been introduced. Still, it represents a tactical split between the California Nurses Association and other single-payer advocacy groups on how to accomplish the monumental task of creating such a system — whether to start with the policy itself or the permission to carry it out.

What it would do: This bill specifies a timeline for when and how the state should start talking to the federal government to get permission to overhaul the health care system.

It would require the state's Health and Human Services Agency to convene a workgroup that would develop a waiver asking the feds for permission to create a unified financing system. The group would have to issue quarterly reports and deliver a full set of recommendations to the Legislature by June 2024.

Key context: Wiener's [Senate Bill 770](#) is one of two single-payer bills that's been introduced already this year. The other, [Assembly Bill 1690](#) from Assemblymember Ash Kalra (D-San Jose), hasn't been fleshed out yet.

The split: One school of thought, championed by the nurses, is that a policy bill — which lays out how the system would work and how much it would cost — has to be passed and signed before the feds can get involved.

Wiener's bill operates under a different idea: that the state has to start talking to the feds first, and use that to come up with the policy language and waiver.

The final product will be more palatable to legislators if it has secured federal buy-in, said Michael Lighty, president of Healthy California Now, a coalition of groups sponsoring the bill. It's the logical next step to act on the [recommendations of the Healthy California For All Commission](#) Newsom convened in December 2019, he said.

The CNA is a member organization of Healthy California Now. But the nurses are working on their own bill, which will look something like last year's failed [Assembly Bill 1400](#), said Puneet Maharaj, the director of government relations for CNA.

"We have a clear understanding that we need single-payer legislation first before pursuing a federal waiver," Maharaj said. "So that's entirely what we're focused on."

What's next: Lighty said the two tracks will converge in 2024. Once the Legislature has the recommendations from Wiener's new working group, it can incorporate those with CalCare and get a policy bill passed.

"There are a lot of names that we put on things like single payer or Medicare for All, and I support all of that," Wiener said in an interview this week. "But we need to be clear with California and that this is about ensuring that every single Californian has access to

comprehensive high quality health care.”

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