Massive Investment In Disability Services In Limbo



Even as lawmakers blow through deadlines, disability advocates say they remain optimistic that a deal will be reached to approve the largest-ever investment in home and community-based services.

The U.S. Senate has yet to take up President Joe Biden's roughly $2 trillion Build Back Better Act. The legislation, which was passed by the House of Representatives in November, includes $150 billion for Medicaid home and community-based services that people with disabilities rely on to live on their own or in group homes rather than in

institutional settings. The historic investment is aimed at getting people off waiting lists and shoring up the workforce of direct support professionals who provide such services.

Democratic leaders had hoped to push the bill through before Christmas, but the measure was stalled again in late December when Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said that he could not back the legislation. Because the Senate is divided 50-50 along party lines and Republicans have unanimously opposed Biden's plan, the bill needs the support of every Democrat to pass.

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Despite the holdup, disability advocates say they aren't losing hope.

"We are confident that while Sen. Manchin said he couldn't support the bill version at that time, there is likely some path forward," said Shannon McCracken, vice president for government relations at the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR, which represents disability service providers across the nation. "All indications are that Sen. Manchin, while voicing provisions he opposes in the bill, does support HCBS. We believe the reconciliation process will play out and that HCBS will be included."

ANCOR and other disability advocacy groups are continuing

to urge their members to call senators in support of the bill.

Earlier this week, Manchin told reporters that there has not been any new negotiation on the measure.

The same day, however, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said "the president absolutely wants to get Build Back Better done." Conversations with "a range of senators who are involved in this process" will be continuing in the coming weeks, she said.

Time is of the essence, disability advocates say.

"Every day that Congress fails to pass increased funding for HCBS means that people with disabilities and their families are facing impossible choices about how to access care, direct support professionals aren't being paid enough to live and people are stuck on those waiting lists," said Bethany Lilly from The Arc. "Congress should act ASAP."