

Lawmakers Plan to Engage Cuomo's Medicaid Panel, Senate Leader Says

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By Dan Clark

Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins says lawmakers are prepared to push back on recommendations from a panel convened by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to find savings in the state's Medicaid program if they don't agree with the group's findings.

Speaking in an interview to air this weekend on New York NOW, Stewart-Cousins, D-Westchester, said her members plan to be as engaged in the panel's work as they can be.

"It's a long, but short, time between now and when we have to make these decisions in the budget, and we will be engaged throughout the whole process and give our feedback, or push back, or support whatever's necessary," Stewart-Cousins said.

Cuomo convened the panel, called the Medicaid Redesign Team, to identify \$2.5 billion in savings in the state's Medicaid program over the next seven weeks. It's part of Cuomo's plan to avoid a projected \$6.1 billion deficit in the state budget.

The announcement was made in Cuomo's address on the state budget last month, and was met with skepticism from Republicans and some municipal leaders. Lawmakers have, so far, taken a wait-and-see approach with the plan, which is still in its early stages.

Cuomo this week announced the members of the panel, which will be composed of officials from state government, the health care industry, and a few other outliers, like Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and former State Budget Director Bob Megna.

Stewart-Cousins didn't push back on Cuomo's choices for the panel, which also included the secretary of the Senate Finance Committee. She said she was more interested in the outcome of its work in the context of the state budget, which is due at the end of March.

"He's got professionals who've been tasked to do this, and we will see what they come up with," Stewart-Cousins said.

Democrats have called, in recent weeks, for the panel to complete its work as soon as possible so they have time to review it as part of the state's broader financial plan. Lawmakers will meet privately with Cuomo over the next two months to decide a final state budget.

It's unclear, as of now, what other issues will be included in that spending plan. Cuomo and lawmakers often shoehorn issues into the state budget as a way of bargaining for other priorities.

During last year's negotiations, Democrats approved a package of changes to the state's criminal justice system, including new limits on the use of cash bail. The new law removed the option of cash bail for most low-level and nonviolent crimes.

Republicans and members of law enforcement, in recent weeks, have called for a full repeal of that law, which they've claimed has endangered victims by allowing certain defendants to go free ahead of their trial date.

Stewart-Cousins, speaking to New York NOW, said a full repeal of the law is off the table, but that they're willing to consider tweaks if it's in the best interest of all stakeholders.

"People are talking about we must repeal the law — we are not repealing the law," Stewart-Cousins said. "We understand why we did this. We did this because for too long, the system that exists has really criminalized poverty."

Democrats have met with members of law enforcement in recent weeks to hear more on their perspective of the law. It's possible that amendments will be born from those meetings, but no specific proposals have gained traction in the Legislature.

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