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Obama: Health Plan Will Boost Economy

By JUDITH BURNS

WASHINGTON -- U.S. President Barack Obama on Saturday used his weekly radio address to tout a health-insurance overhaul making its way through Congress, calling it a critical step toward reducing the nation's deficit and boosting an ailing economy.

Changes being proposed would be especially helpful for small businesses that account for about half the nation's job growth and are struggling with rising employee health-care costs, Mr. Obama said. Such firms now pay 18% more for the same insurance plans as larger businesses because they have less bargaining power and higher administrative costs, which Mr. Obama said has led many to cut employee health benefits or drop coverage altogether.

Congress isn't planning to require small firms to offer health insurance to employees, but many that do would receive a tax credit to help them pay for it. At firms that don't provide coverage, employees would receive tax credits to help them buy insurance on their own. Lawmakers also aim to create insurance exchanges offering a variety of plans for individuals and companies, which Mr. Obama said should provide better coverage at a lower cost than what is available now in many cases.

Mr. Obama welcomed efforts to improve the legislation but warned against partisan attempts to stall it or block it. He pointed to Friday's dismal news of unexpectedly high job losses in September as a reminder that economic recovery will come "in fits and starts," and said he is working with his economic advisers to explore additional options to promote job creation.

Rep. Candice Miller, R-Mich., who delivered the Republican response, said the nation's economy has lost nearly three million private-sector jobs since enactment early this year of a \$767 billion economic-stimulus package favored by Mr. Obama and congressional Democrats. Supporters had said the stimulus package would prevent unemployment from rising about 8%, yet it is now approaching 10%, Ms. Miller noted.

She said the GOP economic recovery plan, based on tax cuts, would have created twice the jobs at half the cost.

Ms. Miller also denounced health-reform efforts as "job killing" and urged Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., to "help promote policies to get Americans working again."

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