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Rising premiums help justify Obama's latest healthcare push, Sebelius says

Escalating costs are stripping families and small businesses of their coverage, the Health and Human Services secretary says, noting that the president is to unveil his latest proposal next week.

February 18, 2010 | By Duke Helfand

A renewed push for healthcare overhaul is being driven partly by the need to stem escalating insurance costs that are stripping families and small businesses of their health coverage, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said Thursday.

"A lot of these customers have no choice," she said, noting that President Obama is expected to unveil his latest healthcare proposal in advance of his healthcare summit next week with members of Congress.

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"I think the president has indicated that he intends to have a proposal . . . for public consumption before the summit," Sebelius said at a Washington news conference. "So there will be one proposal. It is the president's, and I think the idea is that it will take some of the best of the ideas [from the House and Senate bills] and put them into a framework moving forward."

The healthcare summit with congressional Democrats and Republicans is set for Feb. 25.

Sebelius criticized the nation's largest insurance companies for raising premiums on customers who buy individual policies. She said the premiums have contributed to huge insurer gains, citing a report last week that showed the country's five largest insurers made \$12.2 billion in profits last year, up 56% over 2008.

"These profits are wildly excessive," Sebelius said.

She singled out the parent of Anthem Blue Cross in California, WellPoint Inc., pointing to its impending premium increases of as much as 39% that have generated widespread criticism from consumers, state regulators, members of Congress and Obama himself.

Sebelius said that rising premiums in states across the country are leaving customers with few options other than to pay the higher costs or drop their coverage.

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