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## Ex-HHS Chief Ends Silence to Tout Labor Dept. Health Rule

Ousted Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price is dipping his toes back into the public waters with only one issue on his agenda: an upcoming Labor Department rule that would expand association health plans and potentially undermine the Affordable Care Act.

Price is eager for the DOL to finalize the regulation “sooner rather than later,” he told Bloomberg Law in some of his first public comments since leaving the administration in September. Seeing the rule done would fulfill the former congressman’s decades-long crusade to let small businesses join together to offer workers affordable health insurance, he said.

Price, whose criticism of Obamacare on Capitol Hill fueled his appointment as Trump’s top health-care official, wouldn’t talk on the record about any topic besides the association health plan rulemaking. He resigned in September, following public outcry over his use of private charter flights for government travel.

Some Democrats and health policy gurus oppose the association health plan rule. They say it will lure healthy people away from the ACA marketplace, leaving a sicker population that could drive up marketplaces costs or force insurers to exit. But Price said the rule’s value should make it a nonpartisan issue.

“It’s always been perplexing to me why folks all across the political spectrum have not supported” association health plans, Price said in the first of two interviews on April 6 and April 9. “Whenever you can provide greater choices and lower costs for individuals to purchase lower health coverage, then why one wouldn’t do that is baffling to me.”

The new rule would expand access to health plans formed by associations by changing the definition of “employer” to allow more small businesses, including self-employed individuals, to form health plans on the basis of industry or geography.

### Trump Priority

The White House has seized on AHPs as an opportunity to prove that President Donald Trump isn’t failing on his campaign promises to repeal Obamacare. The administration has made the rule a top priority for the Labor Department.

The DOL’s Employee Benefits Security Administration is fast at work on issuing a final version of the rule, although the public comment period ended only five weeks ago, sources with knowledge of the process have told Bloomberg Law.

“The urgency is based upon the need, and the need is really significant within the small business arena,” Price said when asked about the Trump administration’s eagerness to see the rule released and association health plans functioning, as soon as possible.

Trump initiated the DOL rulemaking through an executive order in October, a few weeks after Price left his administration post.

Price wouldn’t speak about the terms of his Sept. 29 resignation over his use of private jets with taxpayer dollars. He also didn’t address his future plans or the related controversy swirling around Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt.

His willingness to go public only to support AHPs adds to the mounting pressure on the department by conservatives and the business community to swiftly finish the rule as a way to foster alternatives to—and weaken—Obamacare.

But Price’s passion for this issue predates his time working for Trump. As a seven-term U.S. representative from Georgia, Price sponsored legislation that attempted to boost association health plans.

### Price Takes New Gig

The former HHS chief has been living in relative obscurity since his seven-month term on the Cabinet ended amid revelations that he traveled on chartered flights costing taxpayers \$400,000.

The interview with Bloomberg Law came shortly after Price co-authored an April 4 USA Today [op-ed](#) titled, “Small businesses are about to get more and cheaper health insurance choices.”

The op-ed also offered the first evidence that Price is now a senior health care policy fellow at the Job Creators Network, a right-leaning group advocating for reduced regulation and policies to support small businesses. JCN was founded by the first CEO of Home Depot and is now helmed by Alfredo Ortiz, a former Kraft and Pepsi executive. Trump’s initial nominee for labor secretary, former fast-food executive Andrew Puzder, is listed on the JCN website as one of its CEO

members.

Price started with JCN as a senior fellow about a month ago, group spokesman Jack Mozloom told Bloomberg Law in an email.

The organization is in the midst of a public awareness blitz to ensure that as many small businesses as possible are ready to structure their association plans the moment they get parameters from a DOL final rule.

Price wouldn’t elaborate on his new role at JCN and whether it might entail a broader effort to spread the word on association health plans.

“I’m not doing anything specifically other than working with Job Creators Network as their senior health-care fellow to support what I think is a wonderful solution to what I think is a real challenging problem,” he told Bloomberg Law April 9.