

WASHINGTON -- Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., says he's heard from constituents on the issue waiting in line at a Lincoln hardware store.

Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, this week had another meeting at the White House to talk about it.

It came up when Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., stopped off for a bite Friday morning at Billy's Cafe in west Omaha, when most of the other customers in the place let him know their views.

"I can't go anywhere without someone talking to me about it," Terry said. "I've never seen such a dominant issue."

Everyone is talking about what to do with the country's health care system.

As Nebraska and Iowa representatives return home this month, they're planning public and private meetings to gather even more opinions. The August recess is considered pivotal to the debate since what lawmakers -- particularly undecided ones -- hear is likely to influence what happens next on the issue.

President Barack Obama and Democrats on Capitol Hill are pushing legislation in an effort to get control of skyrocketing health care costs and expand insurance coverage to the country's estimated 46 million uninsured individuals.

At the heart of current proposals is a public insurance option that proponents say is necessary to foster competition with private insurers. Critics say the public option and other parts of the legislation represent expensive government intrusions into the health care sector that would make things worse.

Tensions have been running high at town hall meetings in other parts of the country. Events in Tampa and St. Louis this week turned violent with minor injuries and arrests reported.

Democrats have suggested the protesters at such meetings represent a narrow segment of the public being organized and egged on by Republicans behind the scenes, while groups supporting the protests say the protests simply reflect the convictions of people strongly opposed to the pending proposals.

The White House this week even offered advice to Senate Democrats on how to respond. They suggested playing up parts of the proposals that enjoy broad popularity, such as plans to eliminate insurance discrimination based on pre-existing conditions.

Senators and congressmen from Iowa and Nebraska said reports of disruptions elsewhere aren't affecting their plans for public meetings in August.

"We think Nebraskans will be civil," Nelson spokesman Jake Thompson said Friday. He said Nelson still is finalizing details of public meetings planned during the second half of August.

Nelson and Terry are likely to be the biggest targets in Nebraska for those on both sides of the debate. Nelson is seen as a potential swing vote, and advocacy groups have been running ads urging Nebraskans to press their case with the senator.

His statements have been scrutinized heavily, with supporters of a public plan alternately trumpeting victory in winning his support or expressing outrage at what they interpret as his opposition.

Before leaving Washington this week, Nelson reiterated that he's looking for what will be produced by the Senate Finance Committee, where bipartisan negotiations have been going on for many weeks.

"I'm keeping an open mind on every option -- public plans, co-ops, private plans, trigger options and any other ideas that could come up," he said.

But Nelson said it would be a mistake to implement a public option that undermines the insurance coverage that people already have, and he said some believe the pending House proposal would do just that.

Terry voted against the Democratic plan that passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Instead of a public option, Terry has proposed allowing the uninsured to shop for plans within the system that covers federal employees and members of Congress. He would include some subsidies for those who can't afford it on their own.

Terry has a town hall scheduled for 6 p.m. Aug. 25 at Millard North High School. Terry said his office has been pondering logistics such as parking, but hasn't considered any limits.

Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., who plans to travel through the state this month and talk to constituents about the issue, has been critical of the Democrats' proposals.

This week, he cited a study by the Lewin Group. That study, commissioned by the conservative Heritage Foundation, indicated that under the House proposal, 65 percent of the 1.1 million Nebraskans with private insurance would leave their private plans and cause hospital income to plummet.

Johanns said the study "clearly indicates the current proposal will decimate health care as we know it in Nebraska."

The Lewin Group is a subsidiary of insurance giant UnitedHealthcare. Other studies have found different outcomes.

For example, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office found that far fewer people would

migrate to the public plan and that many others now uninsured would sign up for private plans.

Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., who has warned about a "government takeover of health care," said he'll be looking to gauge support for a public plan while talking to constituents this month.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., maintains the pending proposals fail to address the real problems in health care. He says the country needs to focus on wellness and nutrition and create flexible new insurance models "rather than simply developing a new government financing mechanism without regard to unsustainable cost projections."

Fortenberry hosted a field hearing of the House Agriculture Subcommittee's nutrition subcommittee this week in Lincoln to examine the cost savings of prevention and wellness initiatives. Spokesman Josh Moenning said 150 people attended. Fortenberry also plans to have individual constituent meetings the rest of the month.

Wellness and prevention programs have been the focus for Harkin, who favors creating a public option. His Obama meeting was to make the case for keeping the wellness and prevention provisions in the plan. They contribute to initial costs, but would produce long-term savings, Harkin says.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who has been deeply enmeshed in the marathon Finance Committee negotiations, said he's heard from some back home who want the public option included, but most have told them they don't like it.

He said he hears, "Well, they've nationalized the banks and General Motors. Are they going to take over the health care system too?"

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, one of the most outspoken conservative members of the House, strongly opposes the Democrats' plan, which he describes as the "National Health Care Act."

Talking to the people in his district, he said, only reinforces his position.

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