

Bill would put doctors back on OKHCA

Stitt removed MDs last year from agency

Carmen Forman The Oklahoman USA TODAY NETWORK

A Republican state legislator wants to ensure doctors have a seat on the Oklahoma Health Care Authority board.

Sen. Jessica Garvin, R-Duncan, pre-filed a bill for the upcoming legislative session that would ensure a medical doctor and an osteopathic doctor sit on the board for the agency that oversees the state's Medicaid program. The bill, which Garvin said was a request from the Oklahoma State Medical Association, comes after Gov. Kevin Stitt last year removed the only two doctors serving on the nine-member board.

In a statement, the Oklahoma State

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Garvin

Board

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Medical Association said having medical experts on the Health Care Authority's governing board is essential because decisions made at the agency affect thousands of Oklahomans.

"While each of the current board members brings different expertise to the table, none of them are physicians," the group said. "It's common sense to have physicians engaged in the decision-making process. They can offer direct insight into patient care needs and discuss how actions within the agency affect those providing health services to our Medicaid population."

The Oklahoma State Medical Association was among the loudest critics of the board shake-up. Members of the group accused Stitt of playing politics and removing two of his board appointees because they voted against his interests on Medicaid managed care.

The group also opposed Stitt's efforts to switch Oklahoma's Medicaid program to a managed care model, in which the state would contract with private companies to oversee care from most Medicaid recipients.

Stitt has defended his decision to replace two of his five board appointees, and said the vote that led to their dismissals was part of a routine rule-making process to keep the agency in compliance with state law.

Several health care associations expressed concerns that the agency rules a majority of the board, including thenmembers Drs. Jean Hausheer and Laura Shamblin, voted to table would reopen the door for managed care despite an Oklahoma Supreme Court ruling that blocked the agency from implementing such changes. The board, with Stitt's two new appointees, later approved the rules.

The governor's office, which does not typically address proposed legislation, did not respond to a request for comment on Senate Bill 1158. Garvin said she gave the governor's office a heads up about SB 1158 before filing the legislation.

After the shake-up, Garvin said she heard from many constituents who wanted to see physicians on the Health Care Authority board.

"It was something that I know a lot of constituents throughout my district felt really strongly about," she said.

The bill would give the Senate pro tempore and House speaker each another appointment to the board, growing the panel from nine to 11 members.

One of the Senate leader's three board appointees would have to be a medical doctor selected from a list of names provided by a statewide association of medical doctors. Similarly, the House speaker would be required to appoint an osteopathic doctor, chosen from a list provided by a statewide association of such physicians.

If passed, the legislation could result in Stitt having diminished influence over the board.

Under the bill, the legislative leaders combined would have six board appointments, up from four currently. Stitt, who has five appointees, would not get any additional appointments.

Garvin said she hasn't discussed SB 1158 with legislative leaders.

It's unclear if House Speaker Charles McCall, R-Atoka, or Senate Pro Tem Greg Treat, R-Oklahoma City, would support changing the makeup of the board since they passed legislation two years ago to restructure five of the largest state agencies, including the

Health Care Authority and its board. As part of that, Stitt and legislative leaders agreed on how board seats would be divvied up.

In response to the Health Care Authority board shake-up, Rep. Monroe Nichols, D-Tulsa, pre-filed legislation in September to change the governor's appointment power at the agency. Nichols' House Bill 2971 would require the governor to appoint at least one licensed physician to the board and others that have health care experience. His legislation also proposes preventing the governor from removing his appointees without cause.

Democrats are in the minority in the Oklahoma Legislature and have little say in whether their bills get heard.

The 2022 legislative session begins Feb. 7 and runs through late May.