

Angry retirees pack Council meet on Adams' health plan

(Daily News, Tuesday, January 10, 2023)

BY CHRIS SOMMERFELDT, NEWS CITY HALL AND POLITICS REPORTER

Members of Mayor Adams' administration faced jeers and hours of critical questioning during a Monday City Council hearing on his controversial attempt to make retired municipal workers pay for some forms of health insurance.

The complicated matter before the Council centers on an insurance plan called Medicare Advantage that Adams wants to enroll the municipal government's roughly 250,000 retired workers in because it could save the city hundreds of millions of dollars a year, he says.

Courts have for over a year blocked the administration from implementing the plan due to a provision in it that would slap \$191 monthly premiums on retirees who want to stay on traditional Medicare instead of accepting Advantage coverage. As a result, Adams has turned to the Council, asking its members to pass a bill that would roll back the underlying law that prompted courts to block the plan's financial penalty in the first place.

But the proposal did not get a warm reception at a marathon Council Labor Committee hearing Monday.

Dozens of retired workers — who have maintained that Advantage would dilute their benefits and put them at risk of being denied care — packed into the chamber for the session and repeatedly interrupted City Hall officials during their testimony.

When Claire Levitt, Adams' deputy commissioner of labor relations, said retirees do not "need to be concerned about" Advantage plans requiring some medical procedures to be preauthorized by a private health insurance provider, retirees in the room burst out in derisive laughter.

"Please be respectful!" Manhattan Councilwoman Carmen De La Rosa, a Democrat who chairs the committee, protested as the guffaws echoed in the chamber. "Let's be grownups."

At least one municipal retiree had to be escorted out by City Hall security after repeated interruptions. More than 200 people signed up to offer testimony as part of the public portion of the hearing, which continued into Monday evening.

But it wasn't just retirees who were critical of the administration's Advantage push.

Council members at the hearing also voiced a range of concerns, and not one of them came out saying they're ready to support the bill that would alter the underlying law, known as Section 12-126 of the Administrative Code. Several members committed to voting against the bill if it ever comes up for a vote.

“I unequivocally say we should vote no on this, and I unequivocally support our retirees,” said Brooklyn Councilman Charles Barron, one of chamber’s most left-leaning Democrats.

In a sign that distaste for the bill is widespread, all six Council Republicans also vowed to oppose the legislation.

Eight hours into the hearing, a senior Democratic Council member told the Daily News it’d be surprising for Speaker Adrienne Adams (D-Queens) to even schedule a vote on the bill, considering the internal pushback. “I’d be shocked if there was a vote,” the member said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Mayor Adams, joined by most of the city’s public-sector unions, has argued it’s critical to implement the Advantage plan because his administration projects it could generate as much as \$600 million in annual savings due to subsidies from the federal government.

Such savings will be critical at a time when the city is staring down a budget deficit that could grow as large as \$6 billion in coming years, testified First Deputy Labor Relations Commissioner Daniel Pollak.

“The delay thus far has already cost the city close to \$1 billion,” Pollak said, referencing the fact that Medicare Advantage was first expected to be rolled out under former Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Ultimately, though, the administration has made clear it doesn’t need to rely on the Council. If the body doesn’t pass the bill, the administration has said it will eliminate all retiree health care plans except for Medicare Advantage, a drastic step it maintains is legal.

The NYC Organization of Public Service Retirees, which filed the lawsuit that caused courts to intervene in the Medicare Advantage dispute, is likely to bring the matter back into the legal arena if the administration takes that route.

“If they did that, I’m sure we’ll see them in court pretty quickly,” Marianne Pizzitola, a retired FDNY EMT who leads the retiree group, said at the hearing to cheers from her members.