



## What's at stake in 2024? Your health care

**“As Nelson Mandela said, it seems impossible until it's done. We cannot give up.” – Ash Kalra**

*911. What's your emergency?*

*America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying.*

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar.**

*(music)*

This time on **Code WACK!** Will California's new single payer bill be a tough sell for the state's legislature, even if most of the state's residents want Medicare for All? What political hurdles must be cleared before such a bill would pass? And what would it mean for single payer efforts if Donald Trump is re-elected president this year? To find out, we spoke to **California Assemblyman Ash Kalra**, a strong single payer advocate based in Northern California. Kalra introduced statewide legislation known as CalCare – AB 1400 in 2021 and AB 2200 in 2023 – that would guarantee comprehensive, high quality health care for all Californians as a human right.

Welcome back to Code WACK! **Assemblymember Kalra!**

**Kalra:** Thank you.

**Q: So last time we talked about people's misperceptions about cost and single payer. I did want to ask you specifically about what California Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas said that Assembly Bill 2200 bill could be a tough, tough sell given the state's budget deficit this year. What are your thoughts on that?**

**Kalra:** No, look, I mean the speaker's being honest and I appreciate that. You know, he's a friend of mine. He voted for AB 1400 when he was, you know, he subbed in on the (Assembly) Health Committee, voted for it, voted on appropriations. He was a co-author on it in the past. Obviously in a speaker role, it's a different role. Just like our President Pro Tem Mike McGuire was a previous co-author. He's not now 'cause he's in a different role and we want them to be honest. They've got to speak tough truths about the fact that it is going to be an uphill battle and we have to speak about the financial aspects of it. So, you know, I don't begrudge him at all for being honest about that. I think we need him to be an honest broker in this. And he will be. But at the end of the day, it's up to us as a community. It's up to me as an author. It's up to CNA as sponsors.

***That's the California Nurses Association.***

**Kalra:** It's up to us as a community to get our colleagues on board because the speaker really works at the will of the body. That's how it's always been. And so, if we can get enough colleagues on board, I know and I'm confident the speaker will be able to help us get it across the finish line of the Assembly and then we'll move on to the Senate. But we still have a long way to go before we get there.

***Q: Right. But if it's gonna save money, then it shouldn't be a tough sell.***

**Kalra:** Yeah, it is true except that part of the problem of being on a budget deficit, it raises fears and concerns of our colleagues and of Californians. So you know, even though we can say yes, you know, this will ultimately save us money in the short term, there's a lot of anxiety because of our budget deficit. And so it's a very realistic thing for us to have eyes wide open, recognize that folks are gonna bring up the budget deficit even though you're correct that this would ultimately save

us money and save Californians - Californian families, Californian businesses, money as well. We have to keep reminding folks of that.

***Q: Right, right. Do you remember assemblymember, if it was like in the billions? I can't remember exactly the numbers, but I know the amount of money that would be saved over 10 years was very significant.***

**Kalra:** Oh yeah. I mean the amount over 10 years would be in the hundreds of billions. We're talking about tens of billions of potential savings a year. So, you know, those estimates are always kind of fuzzy. And what I mean by that is not that they're not making attempts to make accurate numbers, it's just that it's really hard to predict over 10 years what the numbers would be. But what we are certain of is that there will be massive cost savings to Californians.

***Q: Wow. That's great. Okay, so this is a big election year as you know. Could the results, say for the presidential election, have an effect on the possible implementation of this bill?***

**Kalra:** Well, absolutely. Look, I mean, let's be honest here. If the former President Trump gets re-elected, yeah, that's an obstacle. <Laugh>, you know, we have to go to the federal government for waivers. So we shouldn't beat around the bush about that. I think that it's not just single payer, it's a lot of issues that we're gonna have to be in a battle for, but it doesn't mean that we don't push a policy like this forward. The policy itself and moving it forward and getting the fiscal in line and going to the voters. I mean, this is something that will take years to get done ultimately. So no matter who's in the White House, we need to push it forward and we will hope that we have a Democrat there because that will help us in the waiver process and moving forward if we have someone more friendly in the (U.S.) Health and Human Services (department.)

Right now we have Xavier Becerra as our Secretary of Health Human Services. That's fantastic. You know, I've met with this administration. They will be helpful in how we process a waiver application. So there's no doubt people need to show up and at this point, now we know who the nominees are. If they care about single payer health care and the waiver process, they need to vote for Joe Biden. That's just the honest truth. And I get, look it, I get it. Look, I'm a progressive

Democrat. I get challenges of, you know, I was a Bernie Sanders delegate. I get that it's hard to see the issues with the party or areas where there's gaps or obviously issues with Gaza. We feel for the people that are dying every single day there. But ultimately the choices are pretty clear in terms of whether it's excusing student debt, we've had billions of student debt forgiven with the Biden administration. Is it? As far as I'd like to go, no, but there are real people getting real relief through that student debt relief.

We have seen the president is negotiating to reduce the cost of pharmaceuticals. My father takes Eliquis. He also takes Lantus and the other diabetes medication. Those are real savings for real people. The first president to really go in and say, we're gonna negotiate down the most commonly used drugs in our country. And so yeah. Is it going as far as I want? No, but let's be real. Trump would never do any of that. Right? And so when it comes to single payer and the waiver application, we have currently a friendly administration in terms of processing the waiver application and we want to keep it that way.

***Q: Right. If Trump is elected, what does that mean? Is the whole thing put on hold for four years?***

**Kalra:** Well, not necessarily 'cause remember under Trump, they couldn't get rid of the Affordable Care Act and the waiver application process is part of the Affordable Care Act. It was part of the negotiations of the Affordable Care Act, kind of a give to progressives that say, look, you know, if you find a better way of doing it, we can give you Medicare waivers and you can experiment and try it. Vermont did it. They were able to get the waiver. They couldn't figure the financing out and so the Trump administration could try and take us to court. But he has lost going to court, challenging the Affordable Care Act. He has lost doing Medicare waivers when some of the Republican governors have tried to do Medicare waivers because one clear aspect of the waiver process is the Medicare waivers, they can't diminish services that someone would get under Medicare.

So even if it's a narrow program. Let's say you're just doing Medicare waivers for vision care, for dental, let's say a state says, you know what, Medicare doesn't provide vision. We think we have an opportunity to use some state funds and do a Medicare waiver. If we take some Medicare funds, we can provide those extra

services. So that would be allowable under a Medicare waiver 'cause you're not diminishing the amount of care someone's getting. You're actually enhancing it. Well some of the Republican governors try to do Medicare waivers to actually reduce the amount of care and Trump supported them and the court shut them down. So the courts are gonna interpret the Affordable Care Act the way it was written and the way it was written allows for Medicare waivers to expand healthcare services. But don't get me wrong, I still don't want Trump there 'cause it will still be a battle. He would still sue and you don't know what the courts are gonna do. So it does put not just the Affordable Care Act at risk, it puts a Medicaid waiver program at risk if Trump sues a Medi-Cal waiver application.

***Q: Wow. Okay. Good to know. What else would you like us to know about AB 2200?***

**Kalra:** Well, what I'd like you to know is that we're hopefully gonna get referred to (the Assembly) Health Committee and if so, there's gonna be a hearing in April. So be prepared to be there. Please take a look at the legislation, find out how you can be involved. This weekend I'm gonna be participating in a number of Medicare for All house parties happening in the San Jose area. There are ones happening around the state. So see how you can participate, see how you can get involved. 'cause this is a movement.

We really need a movement to show up to let our legislators know, let my colleagues know, and I love my colleagues. I want to make it very clear, if you contact your colleague and say they say, we're not sure where we are, I'm not sure where we are on it, please don't criticize them or say, you know, or harass them. Look, this is a learning opportunity. We want everybody to understand this is a big bill. We want folks to understand what they're voting on and communicating with them that you support it is helpful. And so I don't need everybody to be a co-author. I just need yes votes on the bill and so I trust my colleagues and I believe we can get it there, but it won't happen because I'm doing it 'cause the nurses are doing it. It'll happen 'cause all of us are working together on it.

***Q: And so if listeners wanted to get involved, what's the best way they can get involved?***

**Kalra:** Well, you know, they can go to CNA and go to their website. If you go to CNA, or go to my office, go to Ash Kalra, my assembly website. I actually have a landing page just for CalCare itself and if you go through that link, you'll see the FAQs. You can sign up to get more updates and find out how you can get more involved as well.

***Q: Yeah. One final question for you. How much momentum is there and how optimistic are you that this could finally be the year that the bill passes?***

**Kalra:** Well, I'm optimistic, but I'll tell you, there's not enough momentum right now to be honest sitting here in March. We need more. We need more people. We need more people to show up to communicate with their legislators. I don't quite feel the same energy quite yet. Like we had (with AB) 1400. I understand it can be frustrating 'cause this is the fourth, fifth, sixth time we've been trying it. But as Nelson Mandela said, 'it seems impossible until it's done.' We cannot give up. Someone like him who worked for decades to free South Africa. Let's not take for granted the fact that we have the ability to have our voices heard and let's not give up.

Thank you so much, Assemblymember Kalra. So great to see you again. To join the campaign, go to [www.nationalnursesunited.org/calcare](http://www.nationalnursesunited.org/calcare).

***Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at [heal-ca.org](http://heal-ca.org).***

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