



Updated: Mon., Apr. 23, 2012, 1:41 AM

An \$8 billion trick?

By BENJAMIN E. SASSE & CHARLES HURT

Last Updated: 1:41 AM, April 23, 2012

Posted: 10:45 PM, April 22, 2012

Call it President Obama's Committee for the Re-Election of the President — a political slush fund at the Health and Human Services Department.

Only this isn't some little fund from shadowy private sources; this is taxpayer money, redirected to help Obama win another term. A massive amount of it, too — \$8.3 billion. Yes, that's *billion*, with a B.

Here is how it works.

The most oppressive aspects of the ObamaCare law don't kick in until after the 2012 election, when the president will no longer be answerable to voters. More "flexibility," he recently explained to the Russians.

But certain voters would surely notice one highly painful part of the law before then — namely, the way it guts the popular Medicare Advantage program.

For years, 12 million seniors have relied on these policies, a more market-oriented alternative to traditional Medicare, without the aggravating gaps in coverage.

But as part of its hundreds of billions in Medicare cuts, the Obama one-size-fits-all plan slashes reimbursement rates for Medicare Advantage starting next year — herding many seniors back into the government-run program.

Under federal "open-enrollment" guidelines, seniors must pick their Medicare coverage program for next year by the end of this year — which means they should be finding out before Election Day.

Nothing is more politically volatile than monkeying with the health insurance of seniors, who aren't too keen on confusing upheavals in their health care and are the most diligent voters in the land. This could make the Tea Party look like a tea party.

Making matters even more politically dangerous for Obama is that open enrollment begins Oct. 15, less than three weeks before voters go to the polls.

It's hard to imagine a bigger electoral disaster for a president than seniors in crucial states like Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio discovering that he's taken away their beloved Medicare Advantage just weeks before an election.

This political ticking time bomb could become the biggest "October Surprise" in US political history.

But the administration's devised a way to postpone the pain one more year, getting Obama past his last election; it plans to spend \$8 billion to temporarily restore Medicare Advantage funds so that seniors in key markets don't lose their trusted insurance program in the middle of Obama's re-election bid.

The money is to come from funds that Health and Human Services is allowed to use for "demonstration projects." But to make it legal, HHS has to pretend that it's doing an "experiment" to study the effect of this money on the insurance market.

That is, to "study" what happens when the government *doesn't* change anything but merely continues a program that's been going on for years.

Obama can temporarily prop up Medicare Advantage long enough to get re-elected by exploiting an obscure bit of federal law. Under a 1967 statute, the HHS secretary can spend money without specific approval by Congress on "experiments" directly aimed at "increasing the efficiency and economy of health services."

Past demonstration projects have studied new medical techniques or strategies aimed at improving care or reducing costs. The point is to find ways to lower the costs of Medicare by allowing medical technocrats to make efficient decisions without interference from vested interests.

Now Obama means to turn it on its head — diverting the money to a blatantly nonexperimental purpose to serve his political needs.

A Government Accounting Office report released this morning shows, quite starkly, that there simply is no experiment being conducted, just money being spent. Understandably, the GAO recommends that HHS cancel the project.

Congress should immediately launch an investigation into this unprecedented misuse of taxpayer money and violation of the public trust, which certainly presses the boundaries of legality and very well may breach them.

If he's not stopped, Obama will spend \$8 billion in taxpayer funds for a scheme to mask the debilitating effects on seniors of his signature piece of legislation just long enough to get himself re-elected.

Now that is some serious audacity.

Benjamin E. Sasse, a former US assistant secretary of health, is president of Midland University. Charles Hurt covers politics in DC.

charleshurt@live.com

NEW YORK POST is a registered trademark of NYP Holdings, Inc.
[NYPOST.COM](#), [NYPOSTONLINE.COM](#), and [NEWYORKPOST.COM](#) are trademarks of NYP Holdings, Inc.
Copyright 2011 NYP Holdings, Inc. All rights reserved. [Privacy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)
