

# Bill Proposes Insurance for Construction Workers

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Lawmakers will be considering legislation that requires construction firms working on public projects to provide health insurance.

Story by Walt Williams

CHARLESTON -- Some union officials hope the fourth time is a charm for a proposed bill requiring construction companies working on public projects to make sure their employees have health insurance.

The legislation would require a majority of workers at any public construction project valued at \$1 million or more to have health insurance. The workers could have health insurance through the company or some other means, but they must be covered.

The bill, SB 2478, has been brought before lawmakers at least four times, but so far it has not managed to muster enough votes to pass both chambers of the Legislature. As a result, its advocates have tweaked the most recent version to give greater leeway to companies bidding on public projects.

"We added some flexibility in the way you count the percentage of workers," said Steve White, executive director of the ACT Foundation.

The bill would require 80 percent of the employees working on a public project be covered under a health insurance policy or that employees with health insurance make up at least 80 percent of the total hours spent on the project. Public projects include bridges, roads, buildings, water and sewer systems, airports and any construction contracted by state or local government.

White noted one of the reasons for rising health care costs is the amount of uncompensated care hospitals provide because many people lack health insurance. The union believes the bill is one step the state could take to make sure more people have health coverage.

He said it wouldn't give companies with unions an advantage because governments in West Virginia are required to pay prevailing wage on contracts.

The lead sponsor of the bill, Delegate Don Perdue, D-Wayne, said many nonunion construction companies, but not all, provide health insurance. Some, however, pass along the portion of the prevailing wage they must provide employees assuming those people will use it to buy insurance.

"The problem with that is it tends to encourage workers not to purchase insurance," he said. "The (House Health and Human Resources) committee was convinced this would have some beneficial impact in convincing workers to purchase insurance with the money they make."

As for the industry stance, a spokeswoman for the state chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors said the organization had yet to review the bill.