The nation’s worsening opioid crisis has become another sticking point in Republican plans to dismantle major portions of the Affordable Care Act, with key GOP senators hesitating to support a bill that could threaten addiction treatment for millions of people.

Several provisions of the ACA, also known as Obamacare, allowed millions of Americans seeking substance-abuse treatment to gain coverage, including through an expansion of the Medicaid health program for the poor. But the House bill repealing the ACA, passed in early May, would roll back that Medicaid expansion beginning in 2020 and allow insurance companies to charge some people with drug addictions higher premiums or deny them substance-abuse coverage.

Concerns about those provisions cut into Republican support for the replacement measure in the House. Of the 20 Republicans who voted against the House bill, 16 represent states that saw significant increases in drug-overdose death rates in recent years.

Two of those lawmakers hail from Ohio, which, through the state’s ACA expansion, has enrolled more than 500,000 new Medicaid recipients who have behavioral-health needs, including those with drug addiction and different mental-health disorders.

Now, the same concerns are emerging as a factor as the Senate takes up the House bill and ponders how to change it.

Ohio Sen. Rob Portman said in an interview that there is a growing worry among fellow GOP senators that rolling back the Medicaid expansion without offering other affordable options would have an outsized effect on people seeking addiction treatment, who access medications and other treatments through their insurance.

“So many people on Medicaid and expanded Medicaid rely on that funding for their treatment for substance abuse,” he said. “This is clearly an issue where you don’t want to make matters worse by reducing access to treatment.”

Mr. Portman, along with other Republican senators from states that have expanded Medicaid such as Dean Heller of Nevada, are pushing to wind down the Medicaid expansion funding more slowly. They would have the rollback occur over a seven-year window beginning in 2020. Lawmakers are also looking at including a pot of money specifically for opioid treatment, according to Republican senate aides.

But more budget-hawkish lawmakers, led by Pennsylvania Sen. Pat Toomey, want to end the Medicaid expansion in three years, by 2023. Both sides have dug in, aides say, making the prospect of an overall deal less likely.
Years of loose prescription of addictive opiate painkillers, as well as a prolific supply of opiates from Mexico and China, fueled a surge in overdose deaths over the past two decades. They ballooned from about 8,000 in 1999 to more than 30,000 in 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a number comparable to those who died from car crashes in the U.S. that same year. Recent data suggest the pace of deaths has only quickened.

While he was running for president, Donald Trump often referred to the crisis at appearances in New Hampshire, Ohio and Michigan, three swing states experiencing some of the highest overdose-death rates.

“We will work hard to get all of those people that are hooked—we’ll get them off it. One way or another,” he said during an August campaign stop.

Ohio, with its double-digit percentage increases in opioid-related deaths in 2014 and 2015, has slowly become the symbol of the opioid epidemic. The state’s attorney general recently filed lawsuits against five drug companies, claiming each misrepresented the addictive risks of their painkillers.

Over the past couple years, increasing federal funding to treat opioid addiction has become a rare bipartisan mission, with Republicans and Democrats authorizing more than $1 billion in new grant spending through the 21st Century Cures Act, signed into law in December.

But Democrats now accuse the GOP of breaking that fragile bipartisan consensus through their ACA repeal efforts.

Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat on the Senate Finance committee, which oversees much of health legislation, said her party believes the government should ensure that anyone with a need for addiction treatment gets it, either through open-ended Medicaid funding or a requirement that their private insurance offer it as a benefit.

“When someone has heart disease and needs open heart surgery, we don’t say to them, ‘Gee I’m sorry, the grant funding ran out,’ ” she said.

Two Republicans are offering an alternative approach. In their own ACA repeal bill, Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana would allow states to decide whether to maintain or jettison ACA requirements and subsidies. But it would keep one benefit mandatory: coverage for mental-health and addiction treatment.

“That seemed like the fiscally sound, conservative way to go—because we’ve got to pay for this somehow,” Mr. Cassidy said in an interview.