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Medicaid expansion brings mixed feelings from Utahns

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SALT LAKE CITY — The federal government has a plan to expand health care for low-income Utahns, but the state Senate has yet to commit to agree to the Medicaid expansion.

The decision hinges in large part on a study that weighs the pros and cons of investing in the federal program. The federal government would pay 100 percent of the cost of Medicaid expansion in Utah for three years, and then at least 90 percent for the next seven years. The 9-to-1 match would be worth just over \$4 billion to Utah.

One group of Utah Democrats said they don't want to wait for a study to say "yes" to the Medicaid expansion. They said the deal is a "no brainer."

"Take the money," Sen. Jim Dabakis, D-Salt Lake, said. "It's that simple. This is not some giant constitutional crisis."

However, the issue for some lawmakers behind the federal program is the long-term financial commitment from the state, after the first 10 years.

"I think long-term impact," said Sen. Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan. "I'm deeply concerned we're making commitments on the state level that we're not going to be able to sustain unless we cut budgets in other areas or raise taxes, and I mean significantly. These are big dollars."

As a hard-working student with a double major, Amanda Curtis is one of the 150,000 Utahns who would benefit from Medicaid expansion. She said she sees the health coverage as a bridge to something better.

"Right now I'm a student, and I have three jobs and none of them qualify me for health insurance," Curtis said. "So if I had this it would be temporary until I found something better."

Michael Twede, 26, is in the same boat. He is starting a business teaching Spanish, but he is also dealing with Type 1 diabetes and said the expense is putting a strain on his finances.

"Maybe Medicaid isn't something that everyone should be trying to get on immediately or be on for the rest of their lives," Twede said. "But, I think it's an option for people in lots of different circumstances."

A decision will not be made until the study is released from the federal government. Utah Gov. Gary Herbert said he is not prepared to make a decision until after the legislative session has finished.