

The Salt Lake Tribune

Docs back Medicaid

Support is justified for patient care

Published: September 19, 2012 06:27PM

Updated: September 19, 2012 06:27PM

It wasn't exactly a resounding endorsement, but the Utah Medical Association's House of Delegates has decided to support the expansion of Medicaid in Utah allowed under the Affordable Care Act.

That is significant, since doctors would be — and are now — on the front lines of health care reform. The doctors' statement is one of only a few coming from physician groups. But the support of such organizations — the UMA comprises 3,500 physicians — is critical.

Medicaid payments to doctors are smaller than from Medicare or private insurance, but the docs realize that low-income, uninsured Utahns often can pay nothing if they are not covered.

The 2-year-old law passed by Congress — Obamacare, as it has come to be called — provides for an expansion of the state-federal program for low-income uninsured to help millions of Americans get health care.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in a case brought by a group of states, upheld the law but ruled that states can go along with the expansion or reject it and still continue to receive their current federal portion of Medicaid funding. Utah would be making a mistake to turn down the mostly federally funded expansion simply because it's part of a law that Republicans, including those who dominate Utah politics, abhor.

The 105,000 uninsured Utahns who would be helped by the expansion deserve better from their leaders.

The doctors, in their carefully worded statement, expressed support for expanding Medicaid "if that is the best way to provide coverage to all Utahns." The delegates clearly have the interest of their patients in mind over politics or policy, and that is appropriate. But they also realize how politically charged is the debate over Obamacare in Utah. And, no doubt, some doctors believe there are better solutions to the inadequate or nonexistent health coverage so many Utahns have now.

At the state convention, UMA members heard many viewpoints about the Medicaid expansion, including from Sen. Allen Christensen, R-North Ogden, who said the Utah Legislature will not approve the expansion. The doctors' statement of support in the face of such negativity from an elected official is even more dramatic.

The physicians understand that if Utah rejects the expansion, it means turning away billions in federal dollars, many paid by Utah taxpayers, which would then go to fund the expansion in other states.

That's nonsensical when so many Utahns are desperate for health coverage.

© 2012 The Salt Lake Tribune