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Utah's Medicaid seeks wider safety net

By James Thalman
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Three Utahns whose lives were shattered by accidents and who wouldn't have had a hope of paying the nearly $7 million for surgeries, rehab and medication to put them back together again called on state lawmakers Monday to spare Utah's Medicaid insurance program from pending budget setbacks.

Jerry and Sonja Jorgenson, an American Fork couple who were struck by a pickup in a pedestrian crosswalk in March 2008, said they would have faced financial ruin along with the massive physical trauma of the accident if Medicaid hadn't handled the more than $3 million in care they received in the months that followed. Jerry Jorgenson had multiple critical injuries head to toe, was blinded in one eye and just now manages to walk with a cane. His wife had major ligament and knee damage, and her left toe was nearly torn off.

Mindy Shaw, the mother of Bridger Hunt, the Orem boy who was hit with shrapnel when a neighbor's homemade fireworks exploded as he was riding his bicycle on Pioneer Day in 2008, said if it hadn't been for Medicaid, the family would have endured a devastating accident followed by financial disaster.

"His leg was blown off and his hip was shattered," by the thick shard of metal pipe "that passed through Bridger and then through a parked car," Shaw said. "We didn't know if he was going to live or how we were going to pay for everything. Just the prescriptions alone were $4,000 a month."
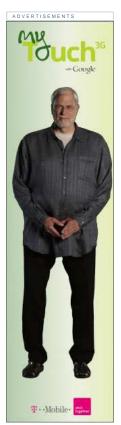
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All told, hospital and follow-up treatment and surgery bills reached well over $3 million and ongoing care still costs $1,000 per month, Shaw said, noting that she would have had to move in with relatives.

"We would have taken care of him any way we could, but without Medicaid, we would have barely been able to pay for the treatment he really needed," she said.

The families relayed their stories as part of an advocacy's group effort to call public attention to the financial frailty of the joint state/federal insurance plan. Enrollment in Medicaid, driven higher recently by the downturn in economy and the growing number of Utahns who have lost private insurance coverage when they've lost their jobs, is approaching 200,000. That's a 20 percent

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increase in the number of Utahns covered by Medicaid in the past year.

"Medicaid is doing its job," said Lincoln Nehring, a health-policy analyst with the Utah Health Policy Project, the health-care research and advocacy group. "It's the state's safety net, and it's catching people who would otherwise fall through."

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