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Utah Legislature: Medicaid advocates speaking up

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SALT LAKE CITY — A mom who said her son would have literally never been put back together without Medicaid called on lawmakers Wednesday not to impose pending cuts in the state/federal insurance plan.

"Anyone can suddenly find themselves needing all the help they can get," Mindy Shaw, mother of Bridger Hunt, 13, whose lower body was shattered in a freak accident two Pioneer Day holidays ago when a neighbor's home-made firework ignited and blew through her son as he rode his bicycle.

"The doctors said three times that night that Bridger was going to die and we should begin making funeral arrangements," Shaw said. "His leg was literally off his body, and probably would have just been amputated if we wouldn't have been able to get (Medicaid) coverage."

Hunt, who is in effect a "\$4 million kid," not only still has his right leg, but it's working well enough he can walk without a crutch for a few minutes, "but it still hurts a lot sometimes," he said. Still, it hasn't stopped him from going four-wheeling, hunting or riding his bike.

He's a multitasker just like any teen these days, trying to do three things at once when he should be doing one — his homework, Shaw said.

"But I'm just glad to have him around, not only back but back and in great condition," Shaw said, adding that she is "so grateful" that he has been able to get to know her son as a young man who, despite a huge dose of bad luck, "somehow is someone who is cheerful in all weathers."

Shaw and others spoke at a news conference urging lawmakers not to reach down into the neediest Medicaid recipients. Under current legislative subcommittee recommendations now being reviewed by executive budget managers, 5,600 pregnant women will lose their health benefits if a proposed eligibility change is ultimately implemented in the Legislature's final budget bill.

If lawmakers set a \$3,000 asset limit in order to be covered by Medicaid, Utah would be the most restrictive state in the country when it comes to eligibility requirements, said Lincoln Nehring, an attorney with the Utah Health Policy Project, a research and advocacy group in Salt Lake City.

"These Utahns do not have the resources to pay for care on their own," he said. "The state, however, still has some viable options" in finding funding to meet demand for the insurance. Medicaid enrollment has increased by 20 percent since 2007.

So-called optional services like dental care, physical therapy, vision care and audiology that most states cover might be eliminated in the 2011 budget, affecting nearly 20,000 people. They could be restored for \$425,711, Nehring said, noting that the state's Rainy Day Fund and revenue from the proposed increase in the state tax on tobacco are viable funding sources.

Lawmakers have a tough job of trying to balance the budget, but restoring those cuts would create a net financial gain of roughly three times that because recipients would be able to stay in the workforce and stay out of expensive nursing homes because they are receiving occupational and physical therapy.

Shaw said she believes many lawmakers and the public in general have an attitude "that people on Medicaid are lazy or have done something they shouldn't have."

"I'd just like people to know that you just never know. You can be walking out of your house, or just getting in a car or riding a bike in front of your house. It could happen, and you could be in the same boat, no matter if you have insurance and no matter how careful you try to be."

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