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Gov. Herbert says state will manage new federal health care program

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SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert said Thursday the state will manage a new federal health care program aimed at the uninsurable.

"I think it's prudent for the taxpayers, with \$40 million on the table on a temporary program," Herbert said during the taping of his monthly news conference on KUED Ch. 7.

But the governor insisted accepting responsibility for the high-risk pool did not mean he supported the nation's new health care reform package pushed by President Barack Obama.

"This is no way an endorsement of a national health care program," Herbert said. "I have issues and concerns with the health care program passed in Congress."

Those include continuing to support a legal challenge by Utah and other states about the constitutionality of mandating insurance coverage, the governor said.

As the package stands, states that opt into the federal plan will receive \$40 million over the next three years but will have to come up with any additional money that's required to insure the high-risk pool. There are an estimated 11,000 more uninsurable Utahns the state would have to cover. Another 110,000 are expected to be added to the 200,000 Utahns already on Medicaid.

The state's Medicaid enrollment eligibility requirements would also be lifted within a few years, and a person's assets could no longer be used to filter people out under the federal reform. Under the new law, Utah has to lift those restrictions.

Starting in September, children cannot be denied coverage because of a pre-existing condition. Adults receive the same protection in 2014.

Insurers can no longer drop a person's coverage if they have paid their premiums.

If someone has a pre-existing condition and has been uninsured at least six months, they will be eligible to buy coverage through the temporary high-risk program — which limits what they will be charged for out-of-pocket costs — starting in July and ending when insurance exchanges become available in 2014.

Herbert said he made the decision because the state will be able to run the program better than the federal government would, serving an additional 575 Utahns.

"The money's going to be spent regardless. And I'm here to tell you we can do it in a much more effective and efficient manner," he said, adding that taxpayers will get "the best bang for the buck."

The decision received support from Utah legislative leadership, including the co-chairman of the Health System Reform Task Force.

"There were definitely some questions up front (about accepting the federal money)," Senate Majority Whip Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy, said. "I was convinced (it was a good idea) once we got the assurances from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that we could (administer the program) on a state level."

The governor's announcement was also met with enthusiasm by a local health advocate.

"We commend (Herbert and legislators) warmly for making that decision. They will not regret it," said Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project. "They understand local control is better."

Hilman said those who stand to benefit most are Utah's uninsurable, who have struggled with rising costs and lack of access to adequate health care.

"The whole insurance business model is shifting so that if you are diagnosed with something serious or find yourself in an accident, you will not become uninsurable," she said. "We're recognizing that we are all human beings ... and that we should not lose our insurance or our financial security when something like that happens."

Also during Thursday's news conference, Herbert said the appeals process for prisoners condemned to death needs to be revised.

"There ought to be a process that's more timely," he said, noting that taking 25 years to carry out the death sentence against convicted murderer Ronnie Lee Gardner was "just too long, and it becomes too much of a circus atmosphere."

The governor also said the Legislature needs to deal with a recent Utah Supreme Court ruling validating the use of electronic signatures in the election process.

Herbert declined to say how he voted in Tuesday's GOP primary race between Mike Lee and Tim Bridgewater, describing both candidates as good friends.

Lee, the winner, "has the potential to represent us extremely well," the governor said.

Not only is Lee a constitutional scholar, Herbert said, he also understands Utah values.

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