Hundreds attend Rally for Recovery, call for full Medicaid expansion

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Hundreds gathered in the Capitol rotunda Thursday for the Rally for Recovery, organized by Utah Support Advocates for Recovery Awareness and the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Utah.

 "We're here today to let our legislators know that keeping things the way they are is not an acceptable choice in the state of Utah."

Rebecca Glathar, executive director of National Alliance on Mental Illness-Utah

SALT LAKE CITY — The Capitol rotunda echoed Thursday with voices touting the importance of treatment for mental health and substance abuse disorders.

And joining in the chorus were cries for full Medicaid expansion.

Hundreds gathered in the rotunda for the sixth Rally for Recovery, organized by Utah Support Advocates for Recovery Awareness and the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Utah.

Supporters held signs that read "Mental Illness Matters" and "Recovery Equals Hope." They also wore shirts printed with "U4ME," Utahns for Medicaid Expansion.

In 2013, more than 423,000 Utahns needed services for substance abuse and mental health, according to the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health. However, more than 368,000 did not receive treatment.

The disparity is in large part due to people being unable to access public funding, according to Rebecca Glathar, executive director of National Alliance on Mental Illness-Utah.

"It is what it is, but it doesn't have to be that way," Glathar said. "We're here today to let our legislators know that keeping things the way they are is not an acceptable choice in the state of Utah."

Glathar and more than 500 rally attendees called on the Legislature and Gov. Gary Herbert to implement the full Medicaid expansion to help provide for the 60,000 Utahns in a coverage gap. They fall below 100 percent of the federal poverty level and don't qualify for premium subsidies through the individual health insurance marketplace.

She said about 40 percent of Utahns in the gap need treatment for mental health or substance abuse disorders.

"The opportunity for mental health and substance abuse treatment will increase greatly if the governor accepts and the Legislature funds Medicaid expansion. It is far more cost effective, as well as humane, to treat mental illness in early stages," said Maude Norman, who attended the rally.

Nearly a dozen legislators visited the rally to show their support and say a few words.

"Today I'm here to talk about the need for full, full, full expansion for Medicaid. … What could be more important than health care?" asked Rep. Patrice Arent, D-Millcreek.

Other lawmakers discussed bills related to opiate overdoses, expungement and shortcomings of Access, a plan unveiled by House GOP leadership two days prior.

"Washington has a check for $430 million made out to the state of Utah," Sen. Jim Dabakis, D-Salt Lake City, said to an excited and thunderous crowd.

"Speaker Lockhart, take the money," Dabakis shouted. "It's simple. We need that money. We don't need ideological points. We don't need political points. Our families, 120,000 of them, are desperate for that money. This is not the time to play political games. Take the money."

House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, said she wants to see the public come to the Capitol and express their views.

"This is where people are supposed to come and have their voices heard," Lockhart said. "Now I know the message they were sending."

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