

Gov. Herbert: I'm an 'action figure' on Medicaid expansion issue

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Gov. Gary Herbert made it clear Tuesday he's not waiting around for lawmakers to make a decision about Medicaid expansion, announcing he's sending staff to Washington, D.C., next week to start selling his plan.

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House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo
SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert made it clear Tuesday he's not waiting around for lawmakers to make a decision about

Medicaid expansion, announcing he's sending staff to Washington, D.C., next week to start selling his plan.

"Being the action figure that I am, we're going to make sure that this starts immediately," the governor told reporters, referring to criticism from House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, that he was an "inaction figure."

Lockhart, seen as a possible challenger to Herbert in 2016, slammed the governor in her opening day address for his willingness to accept the money available to the state under the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare.

But the speaker's plan to instead use \$35 million in state tax dollars, along with federal matching funds, to provide limited coverage to only the neediest Utahns failed to win even the support of the House GOP caucus.

Now, Lockhart has said the House won't consider a Senate bill amended to give the governor support for his state-run Healthy Utah plan that would use nearly \$300 million in Medicaid money to help low-income Utahns buy private insurance.

Herbert said he's moving forward to secure the waivers needed from the federal government for his plan, a three-year pilot program that would utilize all of the Medicaid expansion dollars available to the state.

"The Senate has certainly given me the 'go get 'em cowboy' approach," the governor said.

Lockhart has said Herbert doesn't need legislative permission to negotiate with the Obama administration.

On Monday, both David Patton, head of the Utah Department of Health, and Wesley Smith, the governor's director of state and federal relations, are set to meet with the head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in Washington, D.C.

Herbert intends to be there in April, when he is expected to meet with U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. The pair talked about Medicaid expansion when the governor was in the nation's capital last month.

"We're really going to go after this immediately. We're not going to wait," Herbert said, adding he is working with several other governors to encourage the administration to give their states more flexibility.

"I'm very optimistic about our chances of success on this," the governor said.

Some 54,000 Utahns earning less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level don't qualify for subsidies under Obamacare without the Medicaid expansion. Others earning between 100 percent and 138 percent of that poverty level are also affected.

Lockhart, who has called participating in Medicaid expansion a "trap" for the state because the federal government can't sustain the program, said Tuesday there are "a lot of potential pitfalls" in taking the money.

"I'll be very interested in seeing what (the governor) comes back with," the speaker said. "It's no secret that I am personally not interested in taking that money."

Lawmakers, she said, will "take a look" at what Herbert is able to negotiate, likely in a special session of the Legislature later this year. The 2014 session ends at midnight Thursday.

The governor downplayed the impact of his threatened veto of Lockhart's \$200 million education technology initiative unless the cost was slashed. The speaker abandoned what was seen as her legacy project during budget negotiations.

"I don't know how much influence I had on the speaker," Herbert said.

Before the session ends, the governor said he'd like to see lawmakers pass both a bill aimed at giving the state the ability to make tougher air quality regulations pass, as well as legislation protecting voter registration information.

Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox and the state's county clerks circulated a letter to lawmakers urging support for legislation to "protect and restrict the usage of voter information and prohibit the online publication" of the voter database.

The governor said good policy decisions have been made by lawmakers during the 45-day session, including by coming together on a budget.

"It's been an interesting session, I think, for all of us," he said.

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