

Utah gov highlights Medicaid expansion plan at clinic

Lawmakers have less than a week to come to consensus on a defining issue of the legislative session.

Link: <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/home3/57642387-200/medicaid-herbert-fourth-street.html.csp>

March 7, 2014

By Kirsten Stewart

The Salt Lake Tribune

Because she's a child, 14-year-old Avery Pizzuto of Lehi qualifies for Medicaid and is able to get the medications she needs for her type 1 diabetes.

She can't say the same for her mother, Joy Pizzuto, who earns enough to provide for her two girls, but can't afford health benefits for herself. The single mother can't get tested to see if she's still in remission from cervical cancer, a source of stress for her daughters.



"I would just love to be able to know that she's safe and not have to worry if she's OK or not, because she's the only thing I have in my life," said Avery Pizzuto on Thursday at a press event staged at Salt Lake City's Fourth Street Clinic to highlight Gov. Gary Herbert's alternative to expanding Medicaid.

Prior to the event, Herbert toured Fourth Street, a federally qualified health center serving Utah's homeless.

Health care is the No. 1 "water cooler" topic among governors and state leaders, he said. But too often politicians lose sight of the fact that policies are about people.

One takeaway for the governor from Thursday: the importance of appearances, namely dental care, for employment.

"You usually think dental care is the last thing to worry about," said Herbert. "But [Fourth Street clients] are telling me it's one of the first things they worry about. A light switch went off for me here today."

It's easier to stay employed when you're healthy. But Fourth Street also offers a more direct line to jobs for its clients.

Pam Evans landed at the clinic sick, destitute and hopeless, but left with a solid lead on a job at the Liberty Senior Center, where she works today.

But she still lacks health insurance. "I've been denied Medicaid two times, because I'm not disabled. I have chronic health problems, but I'm able to work," she said.

Fourth Street patients expressed urgency at seeing the governor's Healthy Utah Plan passed. It's the only plan that would cover the Affordable Care Act's entire expansion population, about 130,000 low-income, uninsured Utahns.



It competes with two other proposals being pushed by the House and Senate. But Herbert said, "I'm hopeful in the next three days, we'll resolve the differences."

The Medicaid expansion is often misunderstood as extending coverage to higher-income adults. In fact, it's a streamlining of the eligibility rules to be based solely on income.

Currently in Utah, childless, able-bodied adults can't get Medicaid, no matter how poor. Adults need to be poor and pregnant, poor and disabled or poor and terminally ill.

Were it not for losing a job in 2008, Joy Pizzuto might not be alive today.

The job loss, coupled with deferred health problems requiring surgery, enabled her to get on Medicaid, which paid for the tests that discovered her cancer.

She was treated, but Aver Pizzuto worries the cancer might return.

"Please, let's just get this going so my mom will be able to have Medicaid," she said.

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