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Editorial: Legislature plays with people's lives

Medicaid delay is politics at its worst.

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Link: <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/opinion/57977204-82/health-medicaid-utah-continue.html.csp>

Leaders of the Utah Legislature are playing power politics with the lives of the politically powerless. To call it disgraceful is an understatement.

Already months behind the curve, and several other states, in implementing the expansion of Medicaid as called for under the Affordable Care Act, House Speaker Becky Lockhart and other top Republicans [continue to drag their feet](#). As a result, some 111,000 Utah residents will continue to go without health coverage for maybe a year and a half.

If, that is, they ever get it.

Lawmakers' latest obstructionist act was to say Wednesday that the Legislature isn't interested in using a special session to approve even the watered-down version of Medicaid proposed by Gov. Gary Herbert and being negotiated with federal officials. Any vote may not come until after the November elections, or even in the next regular session next January.

Add in the time it would take even an efficient, motivated bureaucracy to put the policy into practice, and it could be late 2015 before households with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid under the old rules and too low to buy coverage in the federal, tax-subsidized marketplaces would have access to the kind of health care that the citizens of every civilized nation on earth are assured.

While the lawmakers fiddle, people's lives burn.

An indeterminate number of our fellow Utahns — relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers — will get sick, stay sick, miss work, miss school, decline and die because the only way for elected officials to be taken seriously in this state is to take firm and heartless stands against anything offered by the federal government in general and President Obama in particular.

In a reasonable society, Herbert's compromise plan would be rejected out of hand. Here, it's the best we can hope for.

Instead of simply expanding Medicaid, pumping millions of federal dollars into the state's economy and creating thousands of jobs, the governor wants to follow an alternate path. It is a

hybrid plan that would focus on ensuring that health insurance companies will continue to receive their cut even as families in need will have to grovel just a bit more, through an additional layer of bureaucracy tasked with assessing people's worthiness for receiving what they need.

A new study from the [Utah Health Policy Project](#), demonstrating that two-third of those who will continue to live in the health care gap are working and trying to make ends meet, should make a difference in the way our leaders look at this issue. But it won't.

The fact that Utah lawmakers are making life-and-death decisions — for others' lives — out of a need to deprive Obama of a success is bad enough. The fact that they seem equally determined to frustrate Herbert's plans is just abominable.