

My view: It is time for lawmakers to stop stalling with Medicaid

Link: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865606562/It-is-time-for-lawmakers-to-stop-stalling-with-Medicaid.html>

By Tom Metcalf

For the Deseret News

July 9, 2014

Last month I attended the legislature's Health Reform Task Force meeting at the Utah State Capitol. The principle issue discussed was closing Utah's Medicaid coverage gap — the black hole that currently swallows 57,000 or more Utahns who lack access to affordable health insurance. This was the 25th month that Utah's lawmakers have placed this issue on their agenda, and the 25th month they've avoided solving it.



At the May meeting we watched an informative video about the five proposals to close the gap discussed during the recent legislative session, and the dormant status of all proposals except one. The one still on the table is Gov. Herbert's Healthy Utah Plan, which would reclaim hundreds of millions of Utah taxpayer dollars to enroll low-income Utahns in subsidized private insurance.

Dr. David Patton, Executive Director of the Utah Department of Health, updated the task force on the plan. He said the governor's staff is in constant and productive negotiations with federal officials on the specifics of the program. He said this proposal should be ready for presentation to our Legislature for its required approval by the end of the summer. A discussion of the proposal ensued, with comments from both Democrats and Republicans becoming more and more political as the interchange continued. It became clear that philosophy and ideology on both sides has changed little since the legislature first confronted Utah's looming coverage gap in 2012.

One group of lawmakers and state officials are committed to a robust interchange of ideas to discover a workable solution to Utah's health coverage gap. But they are continually thwarted

by the other side, who recycle the same political and ideological buzzwords to avoid real solutions. It's notable that this task force discussion occurred one day after Speaker Becky Lockhart and the House of Representatives leadership indicated their preference to avoid any discussion of closing the coverage gap until the January 2015 legislative session, the third session since this problem came to the fore.

It's also notable that a recent scientific survey indicated that 88 percent of Utah voters prefer acceptance of the governor's plan in place of doing nothing. Among those Utah voters who described themselves as "very conservative," 84 percent supported the Healthy Utah Plan, indicating a sense of "Let's do it!" urgency that is missing from their representatives in government.

The question of how to close Utah's coverage gap has been under study for more than two years in our legislature. The governor's proposal has been on the table for the past three months. An acceptable federal waiver should be granted by the end of summer, if not sooner. Every day, Utah loses nearly \$800,000 in federal funding, already paid by all of us in taxes, and earmarked for health care only, that could go to covering the lives of those in need. Utah has lost nearly \$135 million, and there are still 57,000 Utahns who are unable to access health care. Of these, 316 will die this year because they cannot afford medical care. Readers, and legislators, who want to learn of the impact of being uninsured, versus having health insurance, can view the documentary "Entitled to Life."

Can Utah's Legislature, in good conscience, continue to stall on this critical decision? Speaker Lockhart, legislative leadership and the entire Legislature should address this issue in the prompt and humane manner that their constituents are demanding, and as soon as the governor is ready to present it to them. Further dawdling in the name of "study" of the proposal is cruel, and not in the best interests of Utahns.

Tom Metcalf is a retired pediatrician living in Salt Lake City.