

U Study Shows Medicaid Expansion Population is Bigger than Previously Estimated

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Utah lawmakers were stunned to hear Thursday that the number of people who fall in the so-called health coverage gap is significantly higher than they thought. Researchers from the University of Utah presented [results from a new report](#) on the Medicaid eligibility expansion population to a state health committee.



University of Utah Economics Professor Norman Waitzman presents his findings to the Utah Health Reform Task Force.

University of Utah Economics Professor Norman Waitzman sat before the state's Health Reform Task Force and calmly

explained that the numbers they have been using when considering an expansion of Medicaid are wrong.

"The size of the coverage gap - 0 to 100 percent of the poverty line - is significantly larger in both absolute and relative terms than is often cited," Waitzman said. He and a team of U researchers used federal data from the Current Population Surveys of 2012 and 2013 to determine that there are more than 77,000 Utahns who fall under the poverty line, and would potentially be eligible for Medicaid if the state expanded enrollment. That's at least 20,000 more than the figures the state has been considering.

The report also breaks down demographic information for the newly eligible. The vast majority is over 25 years old. They're largely white non-Hispanic. They're mostly comprised of workers, and about half are in families.

State lawmakers say it will take them some time to digest this information, but if these numbers are correct, task force chair Senator Allen Christensen says it makes him even more inclined to resist a Medicaid expansion or the Governor's HealthyUtah Plan, which would use Medicaid funds in the private market.

"It would mean we would be putting a whole lot more people into the Medicaid system," Christensen says. "Whether it's HealthyUtah, or strictly Medicaid, there's got to be another way. We can't afford to do that in this state, nor do I think we need to have it done." Dr. Waitzman however has a completely different takeaway from the data.

"I hope what this contribution is is to clarify that what's been perceived as a costly government intervention is actually a bargain," Waitzman says. He says the federal government will pay 100% of the cost for the first few years of a Medicaid expansion, and more than 90% in the following years. So from his perspective, expanding Medicaid is a cost-effective strategy for the state to get health coverage for those who need it.