

Despite support, hurdles for Governor Herbert's Healthy Utah insurance plan

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CLEARFIELD – Gov. Gary Herbert may have a workable answer to Obamacare, but first he has to get the federal government and the state legislature to agree with it.

That was the news from Lt. Governor Spencer Cox and Dr. David Patton, the director of the Utah Department of Health, who outlined the governor's Healthy Utah plan at a forum for Davis County health professionals last week. The plan, that Herbert is seeking as an alternative to accepting the Affordable Care Act, would cover those in the uninsured gap with vouchers for private insurance.



LT. GOVERNOR Spencer Cox speaking to Davis County healthcare professionals at last week's forum. Photo by Jennifer Wardell| Davis Clipper

"The Affordable Care Act was meant to expand Medicaid, but we have a lot of providers who won't see Medicaid patients because the reimbursement rate is so low compared to commercial plans," said Patton. "This will put people on commercial plans."

It would also require those receiving the aid to either be employed or in work training, a requirement that is currently being protested by the federal government. Herbert was in Washington, D.C. this week seeking approval for the work requirement, and is expecting an answer by the end of the month.

"The waiver we're asking for isn't in the law itself," said Cox, citing other states that have asked for and received their own waivers in other areas. "It's in the tens of thousands of pages of rules passed by (the United States Department of) Health and Human Services to help implement the law."

The plan is designed to help those who make too much money to be covered by Medicaid, but who don't make enough money for federal insurance assistance to be sufficient. According to information provided by the Utah Health Policy Project, implementation of the Healthy Utah

Plan would insure approximately 10,200 more Davis County adults than are currently covered, including 4,880 who are living in poverty.

Many of those patients go to Midtown Community Health Center, located adjacent to the Davis County Health Department and one of the sponsors of the forum. According to Lisa Nichols, executive director of all of the state's Midtown clinics, the Davis County clinic sees about 6,000 patients a year.

More than 70 percent of those patients don't have health coverage, which leads to greater health problems and higher costs for everyone.

"People without insurance tend to delay healthcare, which means their problems become more extreme," she said. "They also enter the healthcare system through the emergency room, which is more expensive."

The impact extends out to society as a whole.

"Healthy people can do their jobs and pay their taxes," she said. "They affect the entire economy, not just healthcare."

Federal law means that Utah residents are already being taxed for the Affordable Care Act, money that residents would still be required to pay even if Utah rejects the Healthy Utah plan and all other forms of insurance reform.

"The tax argument really gets me over a lot of the other heartburn," said Cox. "The \$300 million is a lot of money for this state. We should get that back."

According to a recent poll conducted by Dan Jones and Associates, 88 percent of residents polled felt that the Healthy Utah plan was preferable to doing nothing, and 70 percent preferred it over Medicaid expansion. AARP Utah, Voices for Utah Children, Utah Health Policy Project and Association for Utah Community Health, that sponsored the forum along with the Davis County Health Department, were among the groups that commissioned the poll.

If the state legislature doesn't agree, however, it won't be implemented. Unlike other states, Utah passed a law in the 2013 session that gives the state legislature a say in the decision. If they end up saying no to the Healthy Utah plan, however, Cox admits that there isn't another option.

"We've really tried to do everything possible to find something that can get past this legislature," he said. "If this can't get past them, then nothing will."

Read more: [The Davis Clipper - Despite support hurdles for Governor Herbert's Healthy Utah insurance plan](#)