

Huntsman fighting to keep Medicaid off budget chopping block

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Health-care services covered by Medicaid, perennially on the chopping block even in the best of times, might not have to have \$13 million lopped off its budget in the 2010 fiscal year after all.

At least not yet.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. left the amount in his 2010 budget proposal, which he said reflects prudent effort to keep health and human services programs intact, particularly those needed by the working poor and low-income Utahns.

Lawmakers, who will have cutbacks front and center when they convene in general session in January, say they don't want to but still might have to compound the economic troubles by reducing basic services for Medicaid recipients, most of whom struggle economically and many of whom have chronic health problems requiring regular care.

During September's special session, \$8.5 million in general funds were cut from Medicaid, which resulted in a loss of federal matching funds totaling well over \$19 million.

Creating more barriers to medical care doesn't make sense at a time when an estimated one in four Utahns generally cannot or won't get health insurance, Huntsman said.

"Critical human service programs are being preserved wherever possible. Some reductions are necessary, but even in difficult budgetary conditions, we must

Huntsman has recommended dipping into the state's Rainy Day Fund and, as he and his fellow governors at a nationwide conference earlier this month told the president-elect, is counting on extra federal funding to shore up Medicaid. On-again, off-again dental coverage, a favorite target among lawmakers, is also restored to seniors and disabled adults in the governor's budget.

"The governor has taken great care in protecting critical services," said Lincoln Nehring, medicaid policy director for the Utah Health Policy Project (UHPP), a research and advocacy group. But it won't hold without Congress, which must pass economic stimulus legislation that includes a temporary increase in the federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) to help the state, Nehring said.

An FMAP increase will both ensure that thousands of Utahns can continue to access the health care they need and the increase will sustain thousands of high-paying Utah jobs, which in turn will help the state get its economy moving again, Nehring said.

Some people might think that an economic downturn is not the time to worry about securing Medicaid services, said Judi Hilman, UHPP executive director. Now is precisely the time, because demand is being driven up by the recession — Medicaid's rolls are expected to increase by 13 percent, or about 20,000 people by the end of the fiscal year in June. Also, investing in the safety-net programs helps ensure a bit more economic security and opportunity for individuals.

"All of this is appropriate in hard times," Hilman said. "It's exactly what the Rainy Day Fund is for."