

Action or consequences: Gov. gives insurers rest of year to offer affordable health coverage

By Heather May and Lisa Rosetta The Salt Lake Tribune
Article Last Updated: 02/13/2008 06:24:19 AM MST

The clock is ticking for health insurance companies to offer plans more Utahns can afford. If they don't by the end of the year, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. is holding out the possibility of mandates. "I'm very willing to let this year play out to see where we find ourselves in a year," he said Tuesday in an interview. "If that doesn't work, then I think we're looking very realistically at an individual mandate in getting us to where I think we need to be." Also on the table for Huntsman: forbidding insurance companies from charging different rates based on medical history. The one-year deadline comes out of HB133, which creates a task force and requires lawmakers and the Governor's Office to develop a health care reform plan by November. The bill does not mandate what new plans insurance companies must provide. But Huntsman made it clear he is counting on them to "play ball." "That market has got to be shook up," he said. To ensure the legislative task force doesn't become the "abyss from which there is no return," the governor said he could call lawmakers into one or two special sessions midyear for progress reports. "I would be willing to call a special session just to provide a spot check," he said. HB133 passed the House unanimously last week and is virtually certain to pass the Senate. But there has been grumbling that months of groundwork for health care reform is resulting in a task force, which can be notoriously unproductive. A reform outline had been developed over the summer by the governor's office, business leaders, low-income advocates and some insurance executives, working with the United Way and Salt Lake Chamber. It called for mandates and an independent commission to develop a basic benefit package. But it foundered once it hit the Legislature. While Huntsman said he anticipates the final reform plan will reflect the key findings in the United Way plan, some health care advocates are skeptical. Insurance companies have had ample time "to offer something affordable and get a handle on rising costs," said Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project. Still, she added, "We're really hoping this task force is the vehicle for creating bold health system reform for us." In a prepared statement, Scott Ideson, president of Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Utah, asserted the company's new insurance plans will "address health and wellness to a much greater degree than they have in the past, driving down costs and generating a more reasonable premium base for the consumer." Huntsman said the spectre of national health care reform is one impetus to get the job done. "We need to do it now if we want to do it our way," he said, "or else you're going to have to do it in large part based upon whatever comes to you from the federal level." Huntsman labeled health care reform as one of his few top priorities - which includes boosting teacher pay - for his hoped-for second term as governor. His first term ends this year. By the end of the year, he expects the state to be making serious progress toward covering the half of the 306,000 uninsured who now qualify for Medicaid or other government insurance plans like Children Health Insurance Program. Three bills in the Legislature address increasing enrollment in those plans; the House passed legislation Tuesday removing a cap on the number of Utah children who can enroll in CHIP and eliminating blackout periods for enrollment in the program. Getting coverage for the remaining uninsured is trickier. Huntsman suggested insurer's first focus on providing "affordable" plans to the "young immortals." "We're going to know to what extent the insurance sector is willing to provide what the market today demands by the end of the year or early next year," he said. "We'll have a clear definition of our pathway forward."

hmay@sltrib.com lrosetta@sltrib.com