McEntee: Don't stint on health care for neediest Utahns

By Peg McEntee

Utah's Medicaid is caring for 200,000 people on a budget that funds just 160,000 people, and House Speaker Dave Clark wants the system to come up with $20 million in savings.

Clark's assessment came after Medicaid administrators said they'll asked for $17 million to see it through the 2010 fiscal year.

The speaker is basing his demand on a legislative auditor's finding that Medicaid wasn't tough enough on providers who submitted fraudulent claims. He says that if bogus claims could be spotted and recouped, Medicaid could come up with its own $20 million.

Considering that Medicaid's budget comes in at $1.7 billion, much of it funded by federal money, it's appropriate that the Legislature keeps a close eye on the system. But to me, that $20 million looks a bit like punitive spare change.

Let's drop the money part for a moment. Let's consider those 200,000 Utahns -- young or old, too poor to afford health insurance, unemployed or disabled -- who rely on Medicaid for basic health care.

To Lincoln Nehring, Medicaid policy director for the Utah Health Policy Project, says the Legislature sets policy and that the Utah Department of Health needs to be responsive to that.

Still, he said, all those people on Medicaid are in danger of getting lost in what seems like nothing more than a political skirmish.

Those of us with family members and friends who have relied on Medicaid know that benefits have been pared substantially in a time of high unemployment, ever-higher insurance premiums, preexisting conditions and overall deficits in the state budget.

I also know that Medicaid is covering an old friend whose hard-driving work life ended when disease -- to be fair, caused by substance abuse -- and mental illness took him down. He's clean now, and his meds keep him from dying either of illness or depression that can become so debilitating he can't eat or get out of bed.

Medicaid has helped countless elderly people survive. It's helped children get basic health care. It's provided occupational and physical therapy to those injured through no fault of their own.

To his credit, Senate President Michael Waddoups took a more benign view of the system's request, saying the Legislature's appropriation committee should put it on the table in the next session with all its other obligations.

When the last resort for so many people is imperiled, that is the humane thing to do.

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