

Florida group targets 'Healthy Utah' Medicaid expansion alternative

By Lisa Riley Roche
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SALT LAKE CITY — A Florida-based group is trying to stop Gov. Gary Herbert's Healthy Utah alternative to Medicaid expansion with a new website urging Utahns to sign a petition against the plan.

The petition on UnhealthyUtah.com asks Herbert not to bring "D.C. values" to the state with his plan for spending the \$258 million available to Utah for Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare.

"Their perception must be Utahns just aren't smart enough to figure it out for ourselves," the governor's spokesman, Marty Carpenter, said Tuesday. "We are smart enough."

But Jonathan Ingram, director of research for the Foundation for Government Accountability, incorporated in 2011 in Naples, Florida, said Utahns need to hear their case against Healthy Utah.

"Why we're doing it is because it's bad policy. We want to make sure everyone in Utah is aware," said Ingram, who is based in Illinois. "The truth doesn't change depending on who says it."

Ingram said any Medicaid expansion should be rejected as "fundamentally flawed. You're changing Medicaid from what it's always been, which is a program for the truly needy, and expanding it to able-bodied adults."

He also raised questions about whether the federal government would continue to financially support Medicaid expansion now that Republicans have taken control of the U.S. Senate in addition to the House.

The governor's plan would offer health coverage to more than 110,000 Utahns who earn less than 138 percent of the federal poverty level, including nearly 60,000 in the so-called coverage gap who won't qualify for subsidy without Medicaid expansion.

Studies have shown about two-thirds of Utahns who would be covered by the governor's plan have jobs or have worked in the past 12 months, according to Rylee Curtis, Medicaid policy analyst for the nonprofit Utah Health Policy Project.

"We don't need outside groups to come in," Curtis said. "It's going to make a splash. It's going to get media attention. But I don't know that it's going to have that much influence on policy decisions."



House Majority Leader-elect Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, said he's already getting emails as a result of the foundation's efforts, which include materials mailed to some Utahns calling the governor's plan "an unhealthy Obamacare expansion."

"To the extent that constituents are contacting lawmakers, it could certainly have some influence," Dunnigan said. But he said the emails he's received appear to be confused about what plan they're opposing, calling it his rather than the governor's.

Now that the election is over, Dunnigan said lawmakers are already starting to examine their Medicaid expansion options in preparation for the 2015 Legislature that begins meeting in late January.

For some lawmakers, he said, that means doing nothing, but for many there is a desire "to study it, evaluate, put different pieces together and see what fits best, then decide what to do."

Dunnigan, head of the Legislature's Health Reform Task Force, said while the governor has "done a good job" on Healthy Utah, he and others may have their own ideas for taking care of low-income Utahns.

Herbert, who is finalizing an agreement on his plan with the Obama administration, is expected to meet as soon as this week with the newly elected legislative leaders about Healthy Utah.

Last session, the Legislature failed to approve Healthy Utah or any other proposal to cover Utahns eligible for Medicaid expansion. One of Herbert's biggest opponents, retiring House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, did not seek re-election.

It's not clear how much the foundation intends to spend in Utah against the governor's plan or who is backing its effort. The group is a nonprofit and not required to reveal its contributors.

In January, PunditFact rated "mostly false" the claim that the foundation is affiliated with Charles and David Koch, the wealthy brothers who are big contributors to conservative causes and campaigns.

The foundation published an analysis of Medicaid expansion in Utah earlier this year with the Sutherland Institute, but the Utah-based conservative public policy think tank is not involved in the organization's current push, according to Derek Monson, the institute's director of policy.

And the foundation wrote a post last month for Forbes.com, titled "Utah Gov. Gary Herbert's Obamacare Expansion Won't Work — And Neither Will Its Enrollees," that said the Obama administration and liberal activists wanted to see Herbert "lured into Obamacare expansion on the false promise of flexibility and free money."

Carpenter said the foundation's efforts against Utah's Republican governor are "unfortunate because we really start from the same position, not liking the Affordable Care Act."

But rather than reject the money available through President Barack Obama's signature health care reform law, funded with the help of taxes paid by Utahns, Herbert has "negotiated the best deal we possibly could," Carpenter said.

He said the information is misleading and may have little sway.

"Just speaking of the politics of it," Carpenter said, "I think Utahns generally have a distaste for outside groups that come in and try to influence policymaking in our state."