

UHPP Hosts Discussion of Healthy Utah Plan During Annual Event

By Rachel Madison

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A crowd of around 150 people gathered together Tuesday during the Utah Health Policy Project's annual health policy conference. The goal of the annual event was to take the pulse on health reform in Utah, which is why a major talking point throughout the day was Gov. Gary Herbert's Healthy Utah plan. The plan is an alternative to expanding Medicaid with the aim to assist low-income people who fall into a coverage gap.

Utah currently has about 45,000 residents in the coverage gap, which was created when the Supreme Court allowed states the choice to opt out of Medicaid expansion. The Affordable Care Act does not provide subsidies for those who have incomes below the poverty level because it was expected that all 50 states would expand Medicaid. While 26 states did so, the rest, including Utah, didn't.

Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox, the event's keynote speaker, spoke extensively about the Healthy Utah plan and why he thinks it's a good move for Utah. He also tasked the audience with showing legislators who the real people in the coverage gap are.

"It's easy to caricature these [45,000] people. I've heard some say they are just ski bums who live in their parents' basement and don't want to get a job, but we know that's not the case," he said. "And a legislator told me they had heard that 30 percent of people in the expansion population are criminals. I have not seen that statistic. So let's be very careful about caricaturing people in a way that's not fair and not correct. When we put real faces on a real issue, it suddenly becomes real to legislators. That's why I would ask for your help with that in the coming months."

Cox said convincing legislators that the Healthy Utah plan is a win for the state will be a "very heavy lift," specifically because of the unpopularity of the Affordable Care Act across the

country, especially in Utah. Cox believes the Healthy Utah plan won't only help people in the coverage gap who are struggling, but will also be something that benefits tax payers and the Utah economy.

"I wish I could tell you how this ends, but I honestly don't know," he said. "I believe it's possible to not like the ACA and still support Healthy Utah. That's the challenge that we have, is to convince others that that is possible."

Rep. Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, who was part of a panel discussion about Healthy Utah at the event, said if the state is going to fully expand Medicaid, then he thinks Healthy Utah is a "good program."

"The question is, are we going to do it?" said Dunnigan, who currently serves as co-chair of the Legislature's Health Reform Task Force. "There's a big learning curve and a significant policy decision behind it."

The Health Reform Task Force will see full details of Herbert's plan for the first time Thursday. After that, Dunnigan believes legislators will start to "weigh in and begin to share their ideas."

"There will be alternative proposals presented Thursday following the governor's Healthy Utah presentation," he said. "I think it's likely we'll do something, but what that is, I don't think we know yet. I can tell you what it won't be. It won't be expansion of Medicaid in the traditional format, and frankly, I think we can take off the table not doing anything. We're somewhere in between and there will be several ideas presented on Thursday."

- See more at:

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