

Health advocacy organizations make 'PUSH' for Utah's uninsured

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SALT LAKE CITY -- A coalition of national health advocacy organizations have formed an alliance in support of Gov. Gary Herbert's Healthy Utah plan, which is an alternative to full Medicaid expansion under the federal Affordable Care Act.

The six-member group called "Providing Utahns Smarter Healthcare" or PUSH consists of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, American Stroke Association and Susan G. Komen -- Utah.



Marc Watterson, government relations director for the American Heart and American Stroke Associations

Herbert's plan would accept federal funds to allow about 100,000 people below 138 percent of the federal poverty level to access affordable health care coverage.

"Because they don't have affordable access, you see many of these people wait until the issue is so complicated that it requires emergency care," said Marc Watterson, government relations director for the American Heart and American Stroke Associations. "This is terrible for the patient and for their families, but also for the state of Utah because it costs more money to go through emergency care than it would be to try to prevent the issues from developing in the first place."

Brook Carlisle, Utah's government relations director for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, underscored the dire need for comprehensive health coverage in the fight against cancer and joined Watterson and others in urging state lawmakers to work with Herbert toward a final legislative solution.

“Uninsured individuals are more likely to be diagnosed with late-stage cancers,” Carlisle said, “which are more difficult and costly to treat and more likely to lead to death.”

More than 1,800 Utahns die from lung disease each year, said Jamie Riccobono, executive director for the American Lung Association Utah.

Riccobono urged support for Herbert’s Healthy Utah plan, which he believes would break down barriers for low-income individuals battling lung cancer, asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

“We encourage members of the Legislature to join with Governor Herbert to provide health insurance to our most vulnerable populations and mend our public health safety net,” Riccobono said.

Sen. Allen Christensen, R-North Ogden is sponsoring a pared down alternative to Healthy Utah with SB153. Dubbed “Frail Utah,” SB153 would cover medically frail individuals with incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level who are at risk of becoming disabled. His measure would cover about 9,000 Utahns, Christensen told the Standard-Examiner.

Watterson spoke against SB153 Wednesday, saying that “for more money per person, we’d be getting less coverage.”

“The Governor’s office has taken the line that SB153 is better than nothing, but not much better,” Watterson said. “For the American Heart and Stroke Associations, we just don’t see that as a viable option.”

Watterson also decried the use of health care access as a political tool.

“It seems like the biggest issue right now is the desire on the part of some legislators to try to find a way to be a victor,” Watterson said. “It’s unfortunate that sometimes issues devolve into this ... really it’s the lives of people in Utah that are at stake here.”

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