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My view: Many Utahns remain uninsured despite options for health care coverage

By Tom Metcalf for the Deseret News
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Public polls in 2014 showed 88 percent of Utahns preferred Healthy Utah over doing nothing. Unfortunately, the task force advised the Legislature not to adopt the plan. Now many Utahns remain uninsured, despite the viable plan. (Shutterstock)

In 2010 a new era was introduced into the United States — the Affordable Care Act — to provide health care for the majority of U.S. citizens. But the Supreme Court soon ruled that the Medicaid expansion portion of that law be decided by each state.

At that time, 301,700 Utahns lacked health insurance and used emergency rooms or charity for illnesses and injuries. Utah's Primary Care Network (PCN) provided only 18,000 low-income Utahns with primary care, but not specialty care — for diabetes, cancer and other illnesses or injuries.

In 2012, Gov. Gary Herbert appointed a Health Care Reform Task Force to bring solutions to the Legislature, which would have to agree to any proposal. Federal monies for Medicaid expansion became available in 2012, and Utah began to forfeit \$796,789 per day and \$281 million per year of Utah taxpayer dollars to states that adopted Medicaid expansion.

In 2013, over 335,700 Utahns remained uninsured. According to the Journal of Health Affairs, 209 uninsured Utahns die each year for lack of treatment. Another \$281 million of federal health care funds was lost to Utah. Gov. Herbert designed the "Healthy Utah" plan to expand Medicaid and utilize private insurance to cover up to 110,000 Utahns. He and public health officials negotiated with the federal government to allow Utah to adopt this plan, seemingly the best option to pass our Legislature. Public polls in 2014 showed 88 percent of Utahns preferred Healthy Utah over doing nothing. Unfortunately, the task force advised the Legislature not to adopt the plan.

In a press conference in December of 2014, Gov. Herbert described Healthy Utah and stood with leaders from the LDS and Catholic churches, and with business, health care and other community leaders to urge the Legislature to support the plan.

In 2015, as the Legislature convened, 53,000 uninsured Utahns remained in the Medicaid coverage gap, earning too little to qualify for help on Healthcare.gov, but earning too much to qualify for Medicaid. Two hundred more of our friends, neighbors and relatives had died for lack of insurance. All the while we continue to lose \$796,789 per day of our federal health care dollars for our Legislature's indecision.

During the 2015 session, our legislators passed none of the health care bills presented. They refused to extend health care coverage to thousands of low-income Utahns, and refused to accept the maximum amount of our federal tax dollars to Utah. Ironically, legislators did accept federal money for a number of other state needs.

As the session ended, a six-member committee was appointed to again discuss the issue: Gov. Herbert, Lt. Gov. Cox, Senate President Niederhauser, House Speaker Hughes, Sen. Shiozawa and Rep. Dunnigan. They will devise, by July 31, a bill acceptable to both the federal government and our Legislature. All six committee members are Republicans, with no provision for Democratic or public input. Meanwhile, thousands of Utahns continue uninsured, often with dire consequences.

Do you know how your senator and representative voted on Healthy Utah? If not, go to <http://www.le.utah.gov>, contact them by email or phone, and ask! Then remember in November for whom you should vote.

Perhaps the most frightening threat to the very fabric of our society, our religions, our culture, is that those legislators who voted against the governor's Healthy Utah plan might actually reflect the opinion of their constituents who have scant empathy, or sympathy, for the uninsured in our midst. I hope that this is not the mindset of the majority of our Utah voters!

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