

'No more red herrings' for Medicaid expansion in Utah?

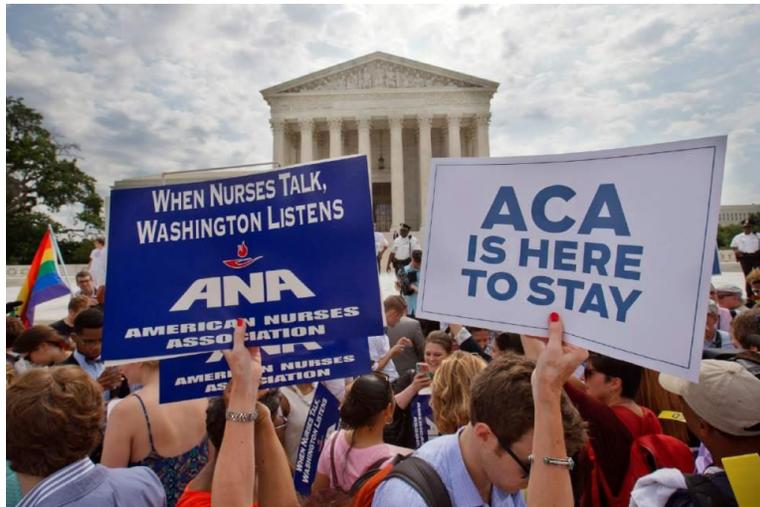
By Wendy Leonard and Lisa Riley Roche, Deseret News

Thursday, June 25 2015

Link: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865631396/No-more-red-herrings-for-Medicaid-expansion-in-Utah.html?pg=all>

SALT LAKE CITY — The U.S. Supreme Court ruling Thursday upholding a key element of President Barack Obama's signature health care law also removed what may be the last hurdle for coming to an agreement on Medicaid expansion in Utah.

"We've had a lot of very constructive deliberations. But this ruling lets us really kind of ramp it up," House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper, said. "It's not going to be in the next week or so, but now I think we're a lot closer than we were."



The speaker is one of four state legislative leaders working with Gov. Gary Herbert on a new plan to use the federal money available under the Affordable Care Act for Medicaid expansion to provide health care coverage to low-income Utahns.

The governor assembled the group at the end of the 2015 session of the Utah Legislature, after the GOP-dominated House defeated his Healthy Utah alternative to Medicaid expansion, and gave them a July 31 deadline.

But it's been difficult to talk about Medicaid expansion while facing the possibility of the Supreme Court throwing out the federally operated exchanges and leaving even more Utahns without coverage subsidies.

"We were waiting for clarity," the governor's spokesman, Marty Carpenter, said.

Utah's GOP leaders opposed to the Affordable Care Act expressed disappointment in the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the federal health insurance subsidies that benefit more than 86,000 Utahns.

Despite the governor being "110 percent" behind his party's efforts at the federal level to repeal and replace the law widely known as Obamacare, the decision wasn't all bad news, Carpenter said.

"The fact remains, if you're looking for that little silver lining, it's that we at least have some clarity," he said. "It allows us to focus now on the best policy going forward."

Another participant in the discussions about Medicaid expansion in Utah, Sen. Brian Shiozawa, R-Cottonwood Heights, said the ruling removes "one of the biggest arguments against it."

Shiozawa, an emergency room doctor, sponsored the governor's Healthy Utah plan last session to cover low-income residents, including some 60,000 earning below the federal poverty level in the so-called coverage gap who don't qualify for subsidies.

"We have a situation we need to deal with. This vulnerable population we have is just waiting, literally, for us to make a move," Shiozawa said, while Utahns pay hundreds of millions of federal taxes related to the new law annually.

House Majority Leader Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, is also part of the governor's group and the chairman of the Legislature's Health Reform Task Force. He said work on a new plan has not "stopped and stalled as much as you would think."

But Dunnigan and Hughes both suggested the governor's hope to have at least a conceptual agreement in place by the end of July may be too ambitious, but it should be done this summer.

Hughes said now that there's a ruling, the state leaders can go back to the Obama administration "with our best ideas and proposals" for putting in place limits on the cost of the program, such as enrollment caps.

The speaker also said the group is looking to the medical community to help fund the state's share of Medicaid expansion, which will eventually be 10 percent of the cost.

Utah Democrats pushed for action on Medicaid expansion sooner rather than later.

"It's time for Utah to act. There are no more 'red herrings' to fish out. The decision has been made," House Minority Whip Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, said, adding the law has insured many Utahns "and now it is time to insure many more."

Utah Democratic Party Chairman Peter Corroon said with the new ruling, "our state Legislature has run out of excuses to avoid passing Medicaid expansion." He urged lawmakers to pass the governor's plan "as soon as possible."

Utah Health Policy Project spokesman Jason Stevenson said the court decision enables the governor and legislators, "who have been waiting to see what would happen," to quickly move forward to a solution.

"We will continue to hold our leaders' feet to the fire to make sure they deliver," he said.

The advocacy group plans to move ahead business-as-usual, enrolling people with significant life events — a new baby, recent job loss or newly relocated to Utah — and preparing for the next open enrollment period between Nov. 1 and Jan. 31.

"We're excited about the renewed interest on closing Utah's coverage gap and plan to direct all attention to getting that figured out," Stevenson said.

Still, whatever the governor's group ultimately comes up with must still be approved by lawmakers. The governor has said he hopes to call a special session of the Legislature this summer.

"I think the most ardent opponents will still be opposed, maybe even more so after today," said Chris Karpowitz, co-director of BYU's Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy.

Karpowitz said the ruling likely means the health care law will stay in place at least until a new president takes office in 2017, a prospect that will cause some lawmakers to "dig in their heels a little bit more."

And Matthew Burbank, a University of [Utah political](#) science professor, also said there will be lawmakers who refuse to support a plan associated with Obama's health care law.

"I think they are going to continue to look for excuses," Burbank said. "A lot of it, of course, is just this fear among Republican legislators that somehow, if they vote for this plan, there's going to be 12 challengers in their next primary — all more conservative than they are."

Contributing: Wendy Leonard

Email: lisa@deseretnews.com

Twitter: DNewsPolitics