

Herbert says new Medicaid expansion plan less than a month away

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By [Lisa Riley Roche](#), Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert said Monday he and other state leaders are less than a month away from having a new Medicaid expansion proposal ready to be considered in a special session of the Utah Legislature.

"We're getting closer all the time, and I hope in the next three or four weeks we'll have this thing resolved," the governor told reporters at his first news conference since the announcement there has been an agreement on a "conceptual framework."



Herbert, just installed as chairman of the National Governors Association at a meeting in West Virginia, said he briefly discussed the details with U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Sylvia Burwell there.

Burwell will be in Utah in a few weeks to speak at the University of Utah, the governor said, and may also meet with him and other members of what's been dubbed the "Gang of Six," working privately on Medicaid expansion.

The group includes House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper; Senate President Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy; and the sponsors of Herbert's Healthy Utah plan and a House alternative that both failed to pass the 2015 Legislature.

At stake are the hundreds of millions of federal dollars available annually for Medicaid expansion under President Barack Obama's signature health care law to cover low-income Utahns.

Those who would be covered include Utahns earning below the federal poverty line. They are in the so-called coverage gap and don't receive any government help with their health care costs without Medicaid expansion.

Little is known about the group's progress other than the governor and legislative leaders have agreed to cover all of the Utahns eligible for Medicaid expansion and to tax hospitals and others in the medical community to help pay for the program.

Herbert was not willing to provide any new details Monday, describing their efforts only as producing "some modifications and some new wrinkles, some new ideas" about health care coverage.

"I don't want to roll out the proposal until we have an agreement," he said. "The concern everybody has is to make sure whatever we do is sustainable, that we're not buying something we can afford today but we cannot afford tomorrow."

Not only will the plan require legislative approval, the Obama administration will also have to sign off to allow the state to use the Medicaid money. The governor, who secured federal support for Healthy Utah, said that shouldn't be a problem.

"There's nothing I know about today that we're talking about that Secretary Burwell will be surprised with, or that I don't think they'll be able to support," he said. "She's happy that we're making progress and encouraged us to continue to work."

Health and Human Services spokesman Ben Wakana said the agency is committed to working "on innovative solutions that provide affordable, accessible care to low income people and benefit the economy and health of Utah. We look forward to ongoing conversations."

Wakana said the agency is still working on the dates and details of Burwell's trip to Utah. He said the secretary appreciated the chance to talk with Herbert "about a visit to Utah to discuss building a better, smarter and healthier system."

House Majority Leader Jim Dunnigan, who sponsored the House's more limited Utah Cares plan last session and is part of the group working on Medicaid expansion, said lawmakers may have a lot to say about their proposal once it's ready.

"They have to be brought up to speed on it and I expect they may have ideas they want to see incorporated or concerns they want to see addressed," the Taylorsville Republican said, meaning the proposal may end up being only a first draft.

Herbert, who initially set a Friday deadline to have a plan in place, has committed to calling lawmakers into a special session of the Legislature to take action on the group's proposal once it's finalized.

Monday, the governor said he's hopeful that within a month, the proposal will be in place and he'll have "the ability to have a special session and have it finally passed by the Legislature."

Herbert called the news conference Monday to discuss leading the National Governors Association over the next year. He said his duties will include meetings with Obama and the president's senior staff on issues important to governors.

The governor passed out laminated cards describing his "Finding Solutions, Improving Lives" initiative that calls for the public to look to the "real innovators — states, our laboratories of democracy" rather than the federal government.

"We the people ought to accept some ownership of that," Herbert said of the increased dependence on the federal government to solve problems despite a Congress that has done "nothing significant in the last decade."