

# Action urged on Medicaid expansion, but deadline won't be met

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SALT LAKE CITY — About 50 Utahns gathered on the steps of the state Capitol to urge lawmakers holding interim meetings Wednesday to finally take action on Medicaid expansion.

Just hours later, House Republicans were told that the group Gov. Gary Herbert assembled after the 2015 Legislature failed to pass his Healthy Utah alternative to the federal program won't have a new plan ready by the end of the month.

"There haven't been any dustups or anything," House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper, told the GOP caucus. "I think we are working well together. We will not make that July 31 date, but we are working toward a resolution."

The self-imposed deadline was not expected to be met, but one member of the majority party caucus used the discussion about it to remind lawmakers what was at stake.

Rep. Ray Ward, R-Bountiful, gave Hughes a card from a Taylorsville woman who'd met with the speaker in April to talk about her need for the care available through Medicaid expansion under President Barack Obama's health care law.



Ward said he received the card from [Carol Frisby](#) over the weekend, before her death Monday. Frisby had been diagnosed with colon cancer after being unable to afford a colonoscopy screening ordered by her doctor years earlier.

"I'm sorry to hear that. She was a sweet woman," Hughes said.

He declined to talk to reporters after the caucus meeting about whether Utahns were dying as a result of inaction on Medicaid expansion.

Ward, a doctor, told reporters he brought Frisby and others waiting for Medicaid expansion to meet privately with Hughes so he could hear from people "who'd had something bad happen to them because they didn't have coverage."

He said it's a message he wants his fellow representatives to hear as well, that Medicaid expansion "matters to real, individual people. ... The budget numbers are not the reason to do it. The reason to do it is people like Carol."

Frisby's widower, Brent, said his late wife wanted lawmakers to reach a decision on providing health care for low-income Utahns "rather than this arguing and carrying on" because people in her situation have rights, too.

The rally on the Capitol steps marked the 898th day the state has been eligible to accept the Medicaid expansion available under the Affordable Care Act, Lauren Howells of the Alliance for a Better Utah said.

"Utahns are still waiting. After a series of self-imposed deadlines and unfulfilled deadlines, our legislators have squandered yet another opportunity to make a decision," Howells said.

The Rev. Catherine Putnam-Netto of the Wasatch Presbyterian Church used scripture to advise lawmakers "it is not a sin to change your mind. It is not a sin to take in new information and come to a new decision."

Crystal Young-Otterstrom, head of the LDS Democrats caucus, asked that lawmakers "do the right thing right now" because "providing health care assistance to disadvantaged families is part of our Christian duty."

The federal funds available to the state for Medicaid expansion would cover more than 100,000 Utahns who earn less than 138 percent of the federal poverty level, including those in the so-called coverage gap who otherwise receive no subsidies.

The GOP governor has been working with Hughes, Senate President Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy, Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox and the sponsors of last session's competing Medicaid expansion plans to come up with an agreeable alternative.

Herbert has said he will call lawmakers into special session once the group is ready with a plan. The governor has said he remains optimistic a resolution will be reached soon.

Hughes told the caucus the so-called "Group of Six" is not debating those plans but "coalescing around beliefs," including that any effort to provide coverage must be sustainable. "We're a lot closer than we started. I know that's vague."

Another member of the group, House Majority Leader Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, referred to the rally and said the group has been accused of "trying to forestall it or trying to come up with lame excuses and not doing anything. That's not true."

He told the caucus it's still "doable" to come up with plan before the 2016 Legislature.

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