

Non-profit groups call on Utah lawmakers to make decision on Medicare coverage gap

FOX13

July 15, 2015

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SALT LAKE CITY, Utah – The debate over providing health care access to tens of thousands of Utahns who fall under the so-called “gap” created by the Affordable Care Act took center stage on the steps of the Utah State Capitol Wednesday.

Community leaders represented several non-profit groups, including Alliance for a

Better Utah, LDS Democrats, Utah Health Policy Project, HEAL Utah, Lawyers for a Better Utah, Crossroads Urban Center, Equality Utah, League of Women Voters, Hispanic Caucus, Coalition of Religious Communities and Utahns Against Hunger.

Advocates wrote their message on their T-shirts: “#STILLWAITING...” As in, still waiting for lawmakers to cover 53,000 people who fall under the coverage gap.

David Irvine, a member of the Alliance for a Better Utah, voiced his frustration with lawmakers.

“If Obamacare had been nicknamed Romneycare, We would have been the first state in line to sign up for it,” Irvine said.

Over the past three legislative sessions, lawmakers have held off on making a decision.

This year, Gov. Gary Herbert appointed six Republican lawmakers, the so-called “Gang of Six,” to come up with a compromise of his rejected Healthy Utah plan.

They promised to roll out a proposal July 31, but it looks like that won't happen—according to one of the members, Rep. Jim Dunnigan, who is the House Majority Leader and a Republican representing District 39

“I definitely feel a sense of urgency to solve this and come up with a sustainable solution that respects the taxpayers,” Dunnigan said. “It will require work beyond July 31st. Maybe we'll come up with a concept by then, I'm not sure.”

That's not good enough for advocates. They said lawmakers are making excuses about high costs and fears the federal government won't provide funding.

“We are deeply troubled that our state can manage to earmark millions of dollars each year for transportation to repair our roads, but we can't find the money to, can't find a way to provide healthcare for 53,000 people under the poverty level,” said Bill Tibbets, Director of the Coalition of Religious Communities.

Irvine added: “I think it's a false argument, and kind of a rhetorical cruel trick, to suggest that people who need help really would rather wait to make sure that it's going to be there six months, two years, rather than getting it when they need it.”

Advocates said 80 percent of Utahns support the Governor's Healthy Utah plan that will provide some type of coverage for those in the gap. They said it's another incentive for lawmakers to work quickly on finding a solution.

