

## Op-ed: Utah's judicial reform will falter without Medicaid expansion

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Link: <http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/2714395-155/op-ed-utahs-judicial-reform-will-falter>

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Several times a week, I would get a late afternoon call from the parents of a young adult who was in the Salt Lake County jail due to an addiction disorder.

The calls were very similar, often times a young man from a good family who had served a church calling, popular, good student and an athlete. Due to an injury while in high school, was being treated and was prescribed pain medication. He started to misuse the pain medication, became addicted due to a biological predisposition, started stealing to support his habit, turned to heroin, lost his job and was separated from his wife and children. Arrested several times, he was finally sentenced to jail time.



His parents tried to help get him into a private treatment program but he was 28 years old, unemployed and they didn't have the means to pay for his treatment out-of-pocket. So they turned to the public, taxpayer-supported system and were asking me to get him into a Salt Lake County public treatment agency.

I felt so bad for these parents, but even though Salt Lake County has one of the best and largest public treatment systems in the Intermountain West, we consistently had three-month waiting lists for a public treatment slot in the community. I then told them that rather than risk a release into the community without a guaranteed treatment slot, maybe the best thing was for him to be in jail in hopes that we could get him into our jail treatment program (which also has a waiting list).

Mom said she understood and didn't want to ask me to move him to the front of the waiting list for a community treatment slot, but jail was not a good place for him. He was not the same person he had been just a year before, and jail seemed to harden him even more. By that time, mom was sobbing and dad was angry and very frustrated, as was I. Unfortunately, this reflects a very typical call from a very typical Utah family.

During the 2015 legislative session, Utah passed a sweeping reform of its criminal justice system. HB348, sponsored by Rep. Eric Hutchings, is called the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) and promises to fundamentally change the way Utah deals with low-risk offenders.

JRI is a "smart on crime" approach which aims to keep the costs of our correctional system (county jails and state prison) under control while putting community-based alternatives to incarceration in place for offenders who are determined to be a low risk to the community.

When you talk to the average Utahn about this idea, they generally say it makes sense if done correctly. Having seen Utah tackle reforms in the past, I have no doubt that the JRI will be done correctly and given adequate resources.

However, it will cost a lot to treat these low-risk offenders in the community, as most of them have a treatable mental illness and/or addiction disorder and most are currently uninsured.

When we look at inmates, most fall into Utah's coverage gap — meaning they don't have insurance through an employer, make too little money to qualify for a subsidized health insurance plan through the insurance marketplace ([healthcare.gov](http://healthcare.gov)), and do not qualify for Medicaid in Utah. I am concerned that if the governor and our legislative leaders do not find a solution to closing the coverage gap, it may doom our JRI reform as well.

Make no mistake, the JRI and coverage gap are very much connected – the opposite side of the same coin, if you wish. The bad news is that the Utah taxpayer will be on the hook if our leaders can't come up with a creative solution to fixing the coverage gap.

The good news is that our leaders are among the best intentioned and brightest people in our state, and I have confidence they will find a good Utah solution this summer. They have to – lives and tax dollars are on the line.

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