

Op-ed: End the stalling and pass Healthy Utah so that more Utahns may live

By Rebecca Chavez-Houck

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On June 25, some 6.4 million Americans, an estimated 86,000 of them Utahns, breathed a collective sigh of relief. In the case of *King v. Burwell*, the United States Supreme Court determined that individuals receiving premium subsidies to make their health insurance more affordable will continue to receive that necessary support.

In Utah, tens of thousands of those covered under the ACA are children. Others are receiving cancer treatments, expecting the birth of a child or depending on their insurance to stay healthy, productive and employed. The circumstances that would have stripped away their health insurance, had *King* prevailed, were not the result of an accident or a mistake, but the result of a deliberate Republican policy agenda. The goal of this agenda is — and has always been — to score political points at the expense of Utah families and their healthcare needs.

In December 2012, Democratic members of the legislative Health Reform Task Force submitted an official letter to the task force chairs calling for Utah to develop a state-run insurance marketplace. At that time, Utah's Avenue H was one of the few existing state-run insurance exchanges in the nation, albeit for businesses and not for individuals.

Democrats saw an opportunity not only to use our investment in Avenue H to our state's advantage but to increase the number of insured individuals. This would have buoyed the state's exchange overall and allowed Utah to continue to innovate and provide better services to its citizens.

At that time, we Democrats found it perplexing that our colleagues didn't use this "Utah solution" to elevate our long-espoused position as the nation's "best managed" state.

The only conclusion we could draw was that the decision to bypass a state exchange in 2012 was driven by wishful thinking that the ACA would fail. By making this decision, state leaders positioned themselves to claim that the ACA would become a failure of "biblical proportions" because Utahns would be forced to use the federal health care marketplace.

This inaction was the initial effort to shortchange Utahns that has repeated itself time and time again since the first Supreme Court decision upholding the ACA was issued three years ago.

Back in the summer of 2012, many in our state's legislative body believed that presidential candidate Mitt Romney would win the White House and the ACA would be moot. When that didn't come to fruition, a three-year "fishing season" for additional "red herrings" to stall adoption of the optional Medicaid expansion in Utah began.

We call for an end to this proverbial "fishing season."

At a national level, rather than continue to attack and undermine the ACA at every turn, Utah Democrats call upon our congressional delegation to be problem-solvers and fix sections of the law that need to be improved. Americans have been benefiting from the subsidies and the access to doctors, hospitals and medications that they enable.

Echoing the will of 80 percent of Utahns on this issue, the Utah Democrats' compromise has been to support the Governor's Healthy Utah plan. Like our counterparts in the president's administration, we have since found that continued efforts to placate Utah House Republicans have proved fruitless in bringing our federal tax dollars back to Utah. We should have adopted the optional Medicaid expansion in Utah 18 months ago.

The fiscal arguments against expansion have now turned into a ruse. Since when have we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and three years studying whether or not to draw down federal transportation or disaster mitigation funds, which require a state match? Enough already.

Our state's continued inaction to close the coverage gap is just another exercise of futile desperation hoping for the eventual demise of the ACA. We started down that road when we refused to set up our own exchange back in 2012. We need to move forward and adopt the Medicaid expansion and not stall for more time waiting for the presidential election of 2016. Utahns' lives lie in the balance.

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