

# Medicaid expansion plan still in the works despite opposition

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HERRIMAN — Anna Standage said she attended a town hall meeting sponsored by opponents of Medicaid expansion Wednesday because she's worried the effort to pass a plan to provide health care to low-income Utahns is gaining momentum.

"I just think there's a lot of pressure," said Standage, a Lehi resident who serves as a Utah County Republican Party precinct chairwoman. "It's like we should do it no matter what, whether it's responsible or not. That's the focus."

At the event held in the Herriman City Library, Standage and about a dozen others heard Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, detail what he said are flaws with the federal program.

"Utah has an opportunity to reduce federal spending, to reduce federal borrowing, by saying 'no' to this Medicaid expansion," Cannon said, warning that's the only way the federal government can pay for extending health care benefits.

Cannon said states should pick up the tab themselves rather than relying on the federal funds available under President Barack Obama's signature health care law, which amount to hundreds of millions of dollars for Utah.

His speech was sponsored by the Utah chapter of Americans for Prosperity, the main political advocacy group for the Koch brothers, influential billionaire industrialists, and the Libertas Institute of Utah, a Libertarian think tank.

Americans for Prosperity Utah State Director Evelyn Everton said the organization is also sending out mailers, calling voters and knocking on doors in the districts of lawmakers who support Gov. Gary Herbert's efforts to come up with a Medicaid expansion plan.

"We are working to educate Utahns on Medicaid expansion and really how it is part of the Obamacare plan," Everton said.

She declined to discuss how much the organization is spending on the effort.

Libertas policy analyst Josh Daniels said the institute is not actively campaigning against Medicaid expansion.

"We welcome input from a variety of groups," Herbert spokesman Jon Cox said. "The governor remains committed to finding a homegrown solution that will protect the interests of Utah taxpayers and the most vulnerable among us."

Area lawmakers who oppose Medicaid expansion addressed the town hall audience.

But they pointed out that Utahns are already paying taxes associated with the Affordable Care Act, money they said would be left in Washington, D.C., if the state does not accept Medicaid expansion.

Rep. Dan McCay, R-Riverton, said those Utahns who don't want the state to accept Medicaid expansion still have a responsibility to help ensure low-income residents have health care.

"There is an obligation that comes with that," McCay said. "Once you say you don't want the government to do it, it's your job to reach down and help those in need."

The governor, along with a group that includes House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper, and Senate President Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy, have been meeting privately since the failure of his Healthy Utah proposal in the 2015 Legislature.

Just how long it will be before the governor is ready to call lawmakers into special session to consider the new plan is unclear. Last month, he told reporters it could be as soon as the end of September.

The governor's group met late last week and again Tuesday but is still working through issues surrounding how to pay the state's share of the program, which will amount to 10 percent of the cost by 2020.

The plan is expected to include assessments of hospitals, doctors, drug companies and others in the medical community, which Herbert has described as amounting to 7 cents for every \$1 of Medicaid expansion money they receive.

It has already been agreed that the plan will provide coverage to all Utahns eligible for Medicaid expansion, including the nearly 60,000 residents earning below the federal poverty level who otherwise do not qualify for any health care subsidies.

Cox said the group has yet to reach agreement on the details of the proposal.

"There is still plenty of work left to be done," he said.

It could be awhile before the group gathers again. The Legislature is traveling to Moab for interim meetings next week, and the governor is heading to Hong Kong for a trade mission Sunday.

Whatever plan they ultimately come up with must also be approved by the Obama administration.

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