

My view: Medicaid expansion in Utah responsibly helps poor, needy

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The state of Utah's approach to Medicaid expansion will help the poor in our community in a fiscally responsible and fair way. In a recent opinion piece in this paper, the policy director of the Sutherland Institute, a conservative think tank, argued that Medicaid expansion would hurt those currently on Medicaid ("New Medicaid expansion framework still fiscally irresponsible," Sept. 6).

Sutherland's newfound compassion for Medicaid recipients is appreciated, but it is discouraging that it would use this "compassion" to argue that we must deny coverage to those below the poverty line who do not currently have it. They argue that we should not allow health coverage to those in our community who cannot afford health care because those currently on Medicaid would then have less access to care. This logic is like saying we should not allow a neighbor with low income access to public transportation because it would make the federally funded highway a little more crowded. Or that we should deny one of our children food because it might limit what our other children can eat. This argument creates a false choice.

The argument also tied Utah's Medicaid expansion to the national debt. Everyone working on Utah's Medicaid expansion plan, even Sutherland, understands that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) levied new taxes to pay for the federal costs of expansion. The bipartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated at the time of the passage of the ACA (and again last year) that the increased taxes and spending cuts in the act were enough to balance the increased spending on Medicaid expansion.

Medicaid expansion will not, as erroneously claimed, force children and the disabled to suffer longer in ill health. Children and the disabled will continue to have the same quality of care provided under their current health plans; they are not left on their own to find access to health care but are enrolled in managed care that helps coordinate their care. Utah has a unique health care system that simulates commercial health care coverage for Medicaid recipients. Utah's Medicaid system is largely implemented under four accountable care organizations, in which members receive managed health care and have access to health care providers similar to many other commercial health plans. As Utah expands Medicaid coverage, some will be added under these plans and others will receive coverage under commercial health plans.

Medicaid expansion is a complex issue, but some facts are clear:

1. Utah is taking a unique approach to Medicaid expansion that is different than any other state. Gov. Gary Herbert and legislative leadership are working to fulfill their commitment to develop a Utah plan for Medicaid expansion that addresses the health care needs of Utah's poor in a fiscally responsible way.

2. The federal government would pay 100 percent of the medical costs to expand this year, although its share decreases to 90 percent in 2021 and beyond.

3. The Utah plan isn't finalized yet but would provide coverage to 65,000 Utahns who are below the poverty line. Many of these have chronic medical or mental health conditions. And all of them are deserving of access to basic health care.

4. The plan would aim to provide commercial health insurance to the currently uninsured, allowing health care providers fair compensation for their services.

5. The plan aims to have those providers who benefit from Medicaid expansion help pay the state's share of the cost. The state would take responsibility for covering the costs of newly added individuals who are currently eligible (almost all of whom are children).

Utah's version of Medicaid expansion will provide health insurance coverage for Utah's poor and needy. Most of the cost will be paid for by the federal government with tax money that we are already paying. It is clear we need to have a plan in place to cover the portion of the cost that will be Utah's responsibility — and the plan being worked on does that. Utah's plan will be compassionate, fair and fiscally responsible. It is the right thing to do.

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