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Editorial: Utah falls behind on access to health care

First Published Sep 21 2015 03:27PM • Updated 4 hours ago



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All of Utah's pride over being rated as a well-managed state is falsely placed when it sees itself falling behind the rest of the nation in a key measure of building a decent society.

Not all that far behind, arguably. And Utah is moving in the right direction. But the progress that has been seen here is in spite of local actions, not because of them.

New U.S. Census figures show that an important measure of progress in the United States — the number of people who lack health insurance — is creeping slowly downward (<http://www.sltrib.com/home/2958667-155/fewer-people-are-without-health-insurance>).

In 2014, the figures show, 12.5 percent of Utahns did not have health insurance. That was the fourth straight year of improvement, and a significant decline from just the year before, when 14 percent of us lacked that basic human need.

But nationally, the rate of uninsured is down to 10.4 percent.

Part of the improvement is likely due to an overall improvement in the economy, though the number and value — pay and benefits — of jobs has not rebounded in sync with the overall economic picture. But a larger factor in the trend must be related to the (maddeningly) slow roll out of the Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare. The stick of the individual and employer mandates and the carrot of tax subsidies for many households has clearly put real health insurance with reach of million more Americans.

And it would be millions more if it were not for the horrible monkey wrench the U.S. Supreme Court threw into the whole system by making the expansion of Medicaid coverage for low-income families optional for each state instead of the mandate that the authors of the act envisioned.

This is reflected in the uneven progress made in Utah. Here, low-income households, those with lower levels of education and members of minority groups still show rates of being uninsured that approach an unacceptable 30 percent.

Utah is one of the states that has foolishly elected not to expand Medicaid. It has sat on the sidelines for years, first hoping that the whole issue would just go away, then fussing over a perceived need to come up with a special-to-Utah method. And even when Gov. Gary Herbert proposed the plan he calls Healthy Utah, fiscal fearmongers in the Legislature have continued to hold up the process.

One of the effects of a nation that fails to provide all its citizens with affordable access to health care is obvious in a recent report (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/09/18/the-government-is-spending-more-to-help-rich-seniors-than-poor-ones/>) from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. Its data show that average life expectancy for rich people (who can go to the doctor) is now 12 years longer than for poor folks (who can't).

These are not just statistics. These are human lives in the balance. Utah's unwillingness to make itself a state that rates on this human measure as highly as it does on the various business metrics it often crows about shows a seriously misplaced set of priorities.



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"One of the effects of a nation that fails to provide all its citizens with affordable access to health care is obvious in a recent report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. Its data show that average life expectancy for rich people (who can go to the doctor) is now 12 years longer than for poor folks (who can't)."

"If they'd rather die, they'd better do it and decrease the surplus population." --E. Scrooge

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