

Utah's Medicaid director steps down

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Roughly two months after another proposed health insurance expansion for low-income Utahns died, the state's Medicaid director is stepping down.

Michael Hales, who held the post for a decade, will join the private sector, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) announced Thursday.

The agency did not give more details on the move, and Hales declined to comment. His deputy, Nathan Checketts, will become interim director Dec. 31 as a search for a permanent replacement gets underway.

Hales, who also was assistant director of UDOH, "has done a tremendous job in a demanding and challenging position in state government," Gov. Gary Herbert said in a prepared statement, adding "his top priority was always the vulnerable Utahns who rely on the program to access health care."

Medicaid currently provides 320,000 Utahns with access to health care, according to UDOH. In October, House Republicans dealt a deadly blow to the latest proposed expansion of the program.

The thud is echoing in the governor's proposed budget, unveiled Wednesday, which includes no comprehensive plan to grow the program. The budget proposal for next year does include a \$10 million safety measure to assign to low-income Utahns whose incomes are too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to obtain federal insurance subsidies — an estimated 62,000 people.

For his part, Hales oversaw changes in the program that included an expansion of services to cover autistic children, as well as other children with other complex conditions. Other shifts under his supervision included a new list of preferred drugs and an overhaul that identified "accountable care organizations."

Security breaches also have affected Hales' agency.

In 2012, hackers stole Medicaid files of about 180,000 clients, mostly children, that were stored on an inadequately protected server. The following year, about 6,000 Utahns on Medicaid were told some of their personal information was misplaced by a third-party contractor.

Still, Hales was a "tireless" advocate for low-income Utahns, working to make sure they received fair treatment and good care, said Matt Slonaker, who runs the Utah Health Policy Project.

Hales' replacement will be appointed by the governor, subject to Utah Senate approval.

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