

Editorial: Only in Utah is minimal Medicaid plan seen as progress

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If the Republican leaders of the Utah House have their way, the state's approach to health-care access will rise from its current status — criminal negligence — all the way up to the merely reprehensible.

For this, apparently, we are supposed to be grateful.

Rep. Jim Dunnigan, the House minority leader, is a leader among those who have made sure the state leaves hundreds of millions of federal dollars on the table rather than accept the multiple economic and humanitarian benefits of just implementing the provisions of the Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare.

Gov. Gary Herbert and some true leaders in the Utah Senate tried hard to put a local spin on things and move the state toward the level of health-care access that is considered a minimal standard of civilized society in every other advanced nation on the planet.

The least awful of those ideas, Herbert's Healthy Utah plan, was approved by the Senate. But Dunnigan and House Speaker Greg Hughes, operating mostly behind closed doors, squashed all those ideas.

Now, after more than three years have gone by, many millions of dollars that would have boosted the state's economy have been lost forever and an unknown amount of human suffering and death has been swept under the rug, [Dunnigan is proposing](#) a plan that is as hypocritical as it is inadequate.

He would abandon his opposition to all things Obamacare, but only as much as it takes to extend Medicaid to the poorest of the poor, particularly targeting those among us who have unmet mental-health or substance-abuse needs.

That would, at least, be a key part of implementing the criminal-justice reform package passed in the 2015 legislative session. That plan envisions less prison time, and more treatment, for those whose criminal behavior can be traced to mental illness or drug abuse. It is at once fiscally responsible and humane. Like, you know, Obamacare.

The problem is that the Dunnigan plan, pushing minimalism for its own sake, would be astoundingly less cost-effective. Spending \$30 million in state money to draw down \$70 million in federal contributions may sound nice. But it would only cover some 16,000 Utahns.

Healthy Utah, on the other hand, would have extended help to all of the 125,000 Utahns with incomes below 138 percent of the federal poverty threshold. And, because it would adhere more closely to the letter and the spirit of the ACA's push to extend health insurance to many more people, it could leverage [many times more money in federal contributions](#) to flow through the state economy as it protected many more of us from both serious illness and bankruptcy.

The money Utah is refusing is not easing the federal deficit. It is being spent in the states that have agreed to implement the ACA in one form or other.

Only on Planet Utah could Dunnigan's latest plan — baldly partisan and spiteful to the poor — be considered progress. The fact that it may be the best the Legislature can do is a mark of shame for all who live here.