

Utah Democrats upset over Medicaid, vow to continue to push for full expansion

By [Wendy Leonard](#), Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY — A bill that would expand Medicaid to every Utahn who needs it died Wednesday, without the votes to pass, according to its sponsor.

"It's not anger, it's frustration that we're voicing," said Sen. Gene Davis, D-Salt Lake City.

Davis' bill, [SB77](#), aimed to expand Medicaid to more than 105,000 uninsured Utahns.

"We could have done more," he said.

Alternatively, lawmakers Tuesday voted to finalize a plan that takes care of the poorest of the poor and imposes new taxes to help cover the costs. [HB437](#) was the only plan in three years of attempts to win favor of House Republicans and pass the full Legislature.

But the plan is essentially an expansion of current Medicaid benefits, eliciting a smaller percent of matching funds from the federal government than is available under provisions of the Affordable Care Act — and that is why Utah's Democratic lawmakers didn't vote for it.

"It just doesn't do what we could be doing in the state of Utah," Davis said during a news conference Wednesday at the Capitol. "Too many people are left behind."

The new plan, expected to be signed by the governor, will extend coverage to about 17,000 Utahns, most of them chronically homeless, who deal with substance abuse disorder or mental illness. It will cost the state about \$15 million, with additional funding coming from Utah hospitals, which have agreed to pay because insuring the poor is expected to cut away a large portion of uncompensated care.

The federal government will pitch in what it does for anyone on the traditional Medicaid program, netting the state 70 percent of its costs to deliver care, instead of



up to 90 percent promised to states that fully expand Medicaid to those earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

HB437 sponsor Rep. Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, has said it is a step forward to see how expansion affects the population and whether pursuing it for additional Utahns would be advantageous.

Davis, however, said, "It is nothing. It does nothing."

Davis has opposed anything but full expansion of Medicaid from the moment it became a choice of states to enact it. [SB77](#), which he sponsored this year, he said, "does not have the votes to pass. It has not been prioritized."

SB77 received approval from a Senate committee but was not voted on by the full Senate. Even if it did pass the Senate before the Legislature adjourns Thursday night, there isn't time for the bill to be considered in the House.

"Health care for everyone is a right in this country," Davis said. "Everyone in Utah should have the ability to access health care."

Utah Democrats, he said, will continue to push for full expansion until it happens.

"... What the Legislature did is they took a check for \$450 million of federal money that belonged to Utah and should have been here the last three years, (and) they took that check for health care for low-income Utahns and they ripped it up. They ripped it up and they said, 'We're not taking it,'" said Sen. Jim Dabakis, D-Salt Lake City.

"I think there's going to be a big change in the next legislative session, not just on this bill, but the people who will be voting on it," Dabakis said.

Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, said recent polls and an influx of emails from constituents indicate widespread support of Medicaid expansion among Utahns. She said Democrats had hoped lawmakers would debate the possibility of a ballot proposition, but bills proposing it never made it to committee discussions.

"It is our goal to listen to the people of Utah," Chavez-Houck said. "There are thousands and thousands of people that are trying to do right by our community, that are trying to do right by their families each and every day, that are working their best, and we are now asking them to be set aside."

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