

Redd: Medicaid expansion one of several options to solve behavioral health issues

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While a recent report published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services highlighted 42,000 uninsured Utahns with behavioral disorders would benefit from Medicaid expansion, Rep. Ed Redd, R-Logan, said Medicaid expansion is not the only solution available to low-income residents.

“The data is clear that people in lower income groups are more likely to suffer from behavioral health concerns, ranging from depression to bipolar disorders to substance abuse,” explained Redd, a physician in addition to his legislative duties. “The important thing to note is there are already resources in the state to provide aid to those not currently covered by Medicaid beyond its expansion to provide assistance to those that need it.”

The national report, released Monday, March 28, estimated 1.9 million low-income individuals without insurance suffering from behavioral health issues had incomes qualifying them for Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act in 2014, but were unable to receive benefits due to living in states which had not yet expanded their Medicaid coverage.

In Utah, 40 percent of those without Medicaid coverage suffer from behavioral health issues, with 42,000 who could have received Medicaid benefits under expansion.

Although the Utah Legislature has not voted to formally expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, the Legislature passed House Bill 437 to extend Medicaid benefits to about 16,300 uninsured Utahns inside the coverage gap. Gov. Gary Herbert signed the bill into law March 25.

“I’m excited about how the state of Utah is taking steps to address the disorders many people face,” Redd said. “I think HB 437 will be a good thing for a lot of people who are down and out. As someone who has worked with patients with similar issues, I know the ability of those low-income individuals to receive proper treatment can help them immensely to work toward steady, gainful employment, which is a major goal for many seeking treatment.”

Some individuals criticized the Legislature’s decision to not offer full Medicaid expansion to cover a greater number of people, including Utah Health Policy Project Senior Health Policy Analyst RyLee Curtis.

“While the recent signing of HB 437 provides benefits to about 16,300 low-income Utahns who suffer from a number of behavioral health issues, it’s important to note that nearly 30,000 Utahns with behavioral health needs will continue to be left out,” Curtis said in a press release. “We need a solution for them, too.”

National Alliance on Mental Illness-Utah Executive Director Jamie Justice agreed with Curtis, noting how untreated mental health issues could result in higher suicide rates and instances of substance abuse across the state.

“It is clear that without mental health, we cannot be fully healthy,” Justice said. “Utahns are not getting the help, treatment and support they need to enter into recovery. We commend the state for passing HB 437 and stand to say it is just not enough.”

Redd said the bill does not mean discussions of Medicaid expansion are off the table, noting the state may opt to enter into an agreement with the federal government to provide additional care. However, he said the number of programs requiring the use of the state’s General Fund revenue make the decision to formally expand Medicaid a difficult one.

“One thing we’ve observed is that in times of economic downturns, sales tax revenue will drop even though the need for social services rises,” Redd said. “No one is saying we don’t want to provide treatment to everyone we can, but it’s a matter of what the state can regularly afford. HB 437 is part of a solution that the state can regularly and comfortably fund in case of downturns like what was seen in 2008.”

In addition to HB 437, Redd highlighted the use of federally qualified health clinics around the state catering to low-income and uninsured families as a helpful solution.

“The discussion to expand Medicaid will always be there,” Redd said. “In the meantime, there are a number of treatment options for those in need that can provide a means toward improving the quality of life for those with behavioral health issues.”