

UDOH discuss Medicaid expansion bill in St. George



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The Utah Department of Health is trying to make Utahns aware of a new piece of legislation that will expand Medicaid coverage for select residents within the state. On Thursday, UDOH held a public meeting to discuss House Bill 437 and receive residents' comments on the four groups the extension will provide coverage to.

The public comment period will help UDOH authorities to amend the bill to provide for low-income residents' needs. The bill, passed and approved at the end of March, is set to expand medical coverage to around

16,000 Utahns in 2018 through \$31.2 million in state tax money.

UDOH is required to get approval from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to implement a health coverage improvement plan to provide the expansion.

"This program costs about \$100 million and is at a 70-30 match," said Nate Checketts, UDOH director of Medicaid and Health Financing. "So conveniently that's \$30 million state, \$70 million federal and hospitals are picking up \$13 (million) to \$14 (million) of the state piece."

Checketts noted that between 3,000 to 4,000 parents with children will receive Medicaid coverage through the extension, meaning a family of three will be able to earn up to \$11,088 a year and still qualify for health insurance.

According to UDOH, a full Medicaid expansion would have provided medical coverage for more than 131,000 people in Utah in 2018 for \$35.9 million in state tax money.

Of that, 64,500 live below 100 percent federal poverty level, which is \$11,880 for individuals in 2016.

The bill's sponsor and House Majority Leader James Dunnigan previously told The Spectrum & Daily News the legislation will cover four groups of people in Utah: parents with children, the chronically homeless, individuals in the justice system and adults needing substance abuse or mental health treatment.

"About one fourth of the additional coverage spots will be for low income parents, parents with children who are not eligible right now because they make a little too much," Dunnigan said. "Now there will be almost 4,000 openings for low-income parents."

With the UDOH approved to raise the FPL criteria from about 40 percent to 60 percent, families can now earn more and still qualify for Medicaid coverage.

An estimated 12,500 childless adults will gain coverage if, at the time of enrollment, their annual income is five percent of the FPL or are “chronically homeless,” meaning the individual has a disabling condition and has been homeless for at least a year or has a disabling condition and has been homeless four times within the past three years.

However, for the estimated 1,000 to 2,000 homeless this would cover, UDOH is still considering removing the provision requiring individuals have a disabling condition in order to cover more people.

For those individuals needing substance abuse or mental health treatment, UDOH plans to include Utahns who were civilly committed before being discharged from a state hospital.

Once amendments have been made they may not have to be diagnosed with a severe mental illness.

Those potential provisional changes will be discussed during the informal public discussion held up until April 29 followed by a public comment period ending on the first week of June.

UDOH will then need to submit a waiver to the federal government. Once approved, new members are expected to begin enrolling by January 1, 2017.

“It’s kind of a blessing and a curse in that it gives them flexibility on how to design these different groups that are getting coverage under this bill but it’s also a curse in that there’s so much need in the community,” said RyLee Curtis, senior health policy analyst for the Utah Health Policy Project. “For the first time we’re going to be covering single adults without children in the Medicaid program but I think what time will tell is there’s going to be far more need than is what’s going to be covered.”

For information on other public hearings, go to health.utah.gov/MedicaidExpansion/hearings.html.

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