



Support providers seek health care clarity

David DeMille • ddemille@thespectrum.com •
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ST. GEORGE - As Utah's efforts to improve health care start intersecting with federal reform, Utah residents are anxious to see how they will be affected.

A group of advocates, support providers and others involved in human services saw a presentation on health care Wednesday, curious about steps Utah's Legislature could take during its regular session, which starts in January, and how health care could shape up over the next several years as federal reform mandates, unpopular with most of Utah's Legislature, go into effect.

Utah has introduced its own set of reforms in recent years, setting up an insurance exchange system and streamlining insurance requirements for state contractors.

But lawmakers have also faced a down economy that has left little revenue to put into human services areas.

Sheila Waddoups, a Washington City resident with a 30-year-old daughter who is mentally disabled, autistic and has a seizure disorder, said she was hit hard by 2008 cuts to dental care and other services. She said her husband, who is nearing retirement age, would need to continue working to deal with the bills that keep coming.

"He can't retire because we have this child at home who needs these benefits, and we're going to have to pay out of pocket," she said.

Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, led the discussion, looking at steps Utah has already taken in recent years, and giving attendees a peek at what could come in the future.

Hilman said she has come away generally optimistic about Utah's chances on moving forward, having met with businesses and organizations across the state that earnestly want to find the best reforms.

"They really care about the quality of the benefit package," she said. "They don't just want to be left off the hook."

Utah has a chance to come through better than most states if it can implement some cost management measures, Hilman said, pointing to areas like fraud prevention, family planning, drug list amendments, care coordination and payment reform projects as possible ways to save, regardless of how federal mandates affect coverage.

"Utah does need to follow the laws of the land, but there's no reason why Utah couldn't do more," she said.

The task won't be easy, though.

Sen. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, said Medicaid has gone from nine percent of the state's budget when he joined the Legislature 11 years ago to 20 percent this year.

Medicaid has seen a 30 percent enrollment growth over the past three years, but the program has received no ongoing funding because of revenue shortages. It would take a \$20 million boost to meet 2011 needs.

Urquhart urged residents to make their desires and concerns known to legislators, saying more input from constituents is always helpful.

"There are no fictional needs here," he said. "These are essentially people in poverty or people with disabilities. There are no easy stories."

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