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The Salt Lake Tribune

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Utah could use health care reform

The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 11/30/2009 07:03:14 PM MST

As the health care reform debate began Monday in the U.S. Senate, a look at the Utah numbers revealed a dismal picture for a state that prides itself on self-sufficiency, prudence and family values.

In a state with just over 2 million residents, 364,000 are uninsured this year, and the number is growing by about 110 every day.

The average family premium in Utah costs \$900 more that it would because the system doesn't cover everyone. (The figure is \$1,100 nationally.)

The Utah economy will lose as much as \$2 billion this year in productivity due to the uninsured (up to \$248 billion nationally).

Without reform, the average family premium will rise from \$12,681 to \$21,639 by 2019.

Those figures are in a state-by-state report released this year by the Center for American Progress, which counted undocumented immigrants in the ranks of the uninsured here.

But back in Washington, D.C., Utah's senators and representatives are foursquare against health care reform; Sen. Orrin Hatch has deemed it a "holy war" -- what that means you'll have to decide for yourself -- and a "lousy bill" that will cost taxpayers "like mad" for the rest of our lives.

At least Sen. Bob Bennett, in league with Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden, has an alternative, although it's getting much the same cold shoulder as the Democratic bill now being debated.

Here in Utah, though, there's a hell of a lot of people living, and dying, without

the basic coverage that could prevent health disasters and treat them if they occur, says Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project.

Of the 364,000 uninsured, there are those eligible for a public program but aren't enrolled, and the "young immortals," people in their 20s who are healthy, going to school or have started families and careers. Together, they make up one third of those without coverage.

The remaining two-thirds own or work in small businesses, and people floating on the individual market, often with pre-existing conditions that the federal legislation could help enormously.

I've talked with business owners who have resisted cutting health insurance even as their share of the costs cuts deeply into what they can pay their workers. And I've spoken with the jobless uninsured

people lucky enough to find free clinics -- or just limp along if they can't.

They see a flicker of hope in the federal legislation, but wonder if Congress has the will to cut the bitterly partisan infighting and get something done.

"Every time we survey, or talk to, the owners, boy, are they ready for change," Hilman says. She doesn't think the proposed public option -- government-sponsored health insurance -- will survive. Still, she said, a recent UHPP survey found that 69 percent of those polled did want the option, and 6 percent wanted only a public option.

Among those surveyed, she said, Republicans outnumbered Democrats 3½ to one. It's frustrating, Hilman said, and ferocious resistance among many in Congress seems to be more about "bringing [President] Obama to his knees than to argue the merits of the specific proposals."

To its credit, Utah has several initiatives that could help those 364,000 -- NetCare, the Utah Health Exchange, the Children's Health Insurance Program, the Health Care Safety Net and more.

But it will take a federal-state effort to get insurance to everyone possible. And, as Hilman points out, this isn't a winner-take-all proposal.

The process that began on Monday probably will drag on for months. But it's a start, one that probably will take years of evolution to get us to where we should be as an enlightened nation.

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