

Feds spending 'serious dollars' on Obamacare in Utah, House GOP hears

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SALT LAKE CITY — Even without Medicaid expansion, Utahns are paying less in taxes related to President Barack Obama's health care law than they're getting back, the House Republican caucus heard Wednesday.

"These are important numbers," House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper, said. "I think many will be surprised by what the data says versus what we're hearing by way of narrative."

Hughes said what's being claimed is that the state is sending hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes to Washington, D.C., but not receiving "one red dime" because the state has not expanded Medicaid to provide coverage for low-income Utahns.

A chart put together for the House GOP by the Legislative Fiscal Analyst's Office showed the federal government spent \$730 million in Utah through the Affordable Care Act while collecting \$710 million in related taxes in the budget year that ended June 30.

House Republicans were encouraged to share the numbers with their constituents, in the caucus' first meeting since rejecting a Medicaid expansion plan from Gov. Gary Herbert and GOP legislative leaders last week.

The plan, known as UtahAccess+, would have used the \$450 million available annually under the Affordable Care Act to provide coverage for about 95,000 Utahns, including those living in poverty who now don't receive any health care subsidies.

The decision by House Republicans, along with a lack of support in the Senate, ended the governor's hopes of getting a Medicaid expansion plan approved in a special session.

The caucus discussion came after a protest on the Capitol lawn that included white crosses placed to represent the estimated 360 Utahns who have died during the past three years because without Medicaid expansion, they had no coverage.

"This month, next month and each succeeding month, until Medicaid expansion is enacted, there will be more lives lost and more suffering by those individuals and their families who cannot afford health care coverage," Jonathan Ruga said.

Ruga, a board member of the event's organizer, Alliance for a Better Utah, said that's "simply unacceptable in the richest country in the world and in a state that prides itself on being caring and compassionate."

No mention was made of the protest at the caucus. House Republicans did, however, ask a number of questions about the amount of tax dollars coming back, as well as what's next for Medicaid expansion.

Several caucus members, including Rep. Brian Greene, R-Pleasant Grove, wanted to know how accepting Medicaid would affect the numbers and were told that wasn't available but would be calculated.

A second chart provided to the caucus noted the federal government has also reduced reimbursements for Medicaid, Medicare and other health care programs by \$470 million annually.

Rep. Jacob Anderegg, R-Lehi, said the chart showing the state is already getting more back than is being paid in taxes "begs the question: Why is the governor, the Democrats, and all the proponents, why are they beating us up?"

House Majority Leader Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, said the argument has been made that money is coming back to the state through the health care law also known as Obamacare, but has been ignored by supporters of Medicaid expansion.

"We are getting quite a bit of money back. Now, the argument again can be made, 'Well, if you expand, you'll get even more money back, OK?' But we're getting a lot of serious dollars coming to our state," Dunnigan said.

Later, Hughes said House Republicans need to stop talking about "chasing federal dollars" and focus on a more limited plan now during the 2016 Legislature that begins meeting in January.

"I think we are going to have a Utah solution," he said. "If you put it next to a very rich and robust Medicaid program it probably does suffer. I'm going to tell you right now it's not going to be the same program. It can't be."

Legislative leaders met with the governor last week after the failure of UtahAccess+ and said the intent is to draft a bill that offers coverage initially only to Utahns who qualify as medically frail.

Hughes said there has been "selective outrage" about the House Republicans holding a closed caucus to take a straw vote on UtahAccess+, noting Senate Republicans always close their caucus meetings.

The speaker also defended his decision to require the 38 votes needed to approve the plan to all come from the GOP supermajority. He said it was "a lie" to suggest that hurt the legislative process.

"I use those words on purpose. It is that misleading. I regret that the public who might not be aware of the process that we have would think that this body would interrupt anyone's duly elected representative's role in this Legislature," Hughes said.

Senate Republicans reportedly received only a brief update on Medicaid expansion in their closed caucus.

The governor, who pitched his Healthy Utah version of Medicaid expansion that failed in the House last session as a way to bring back tax dollars flowing to Washington, had no comment on the House numbers Wednesday.

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