

# Utah Healthcare summit highlights challenges, solutions

KUTV

BY MATT GEPHARDT THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3RD 2015

Link: <http://kutv.com/news/get-gephardt/utah-healthcare-summit-highlights-challenges-solutions>



(KUTV) Hundreds of people, including physicians, politicians, patients, insurance experts, reporters and patients gathered Thursday at the West Valley City Multicultural Center to

talk about health. It's an annual summit put on by the Utah Health Policy Project.

The organization's executive director, Matt Slonaker, says they attempted to focus the all-day conference on the consumer, addressing the concerns of Utah's health care recipient. The conversation, debated by panelists as well as individual experts, covered where Utah health has been in the past, where it is now and where it is going.

"Are consumers really getting the value they're putting into Healthcare? We don't even know what our bill is half the time until after we get the service and sometimes we don't have much choice about where to get the service," Slonaker said.

Experts on the various panels answered tough questions about health care policies, like why things cost so much and why medical bills are all written in codes that most people cannot read.

At times, the conversation got contentious, especially when Utah house speaker Greg Hughes and state senator Brian Shiozawa sparred about why Utah has rejected Medicaid expansion - a move that has left 50 thousands of Utah's most vulnerable people unable to get Medicaid.



Hughes, who has been against the expansion, argued he is looking at the big picture. He said Utah shouldn't put itself into a position where programs are put into place that rely on federal dollar that may

one day stop coming.

He referenced Arches Healthcare which failed last month after only 12% of money the insurance co-op was expecting to receive from the feds came.

The failure has 60-thousand people scrambling for insurance.

And Hughes blamed the media for not properly conveying his position to the public.

Shiozawa, an emergency room physician by profession, said that without expanding Medicaid, fewer people have access to health insurance. He emphasized that not expanding Medicaid is increasing costs in Utah because patients have no choice but to turn to ERs, where costs are much higher than a medical clinic.

Shiozawa also said that Hughes' position means Utah is sending tax money to Washington that the state is not getting back, a point Governor Herbert has emphasized for several months.

Based on three separate instances in which the panel had to pause for applause, the crowd seemed to side with Shiozawa, at least vocally.

Panel moderator Glen Mills of KTVX-TV and an audience member who identified himself as a retired pediatrician pressed Speaker Hughes on what would need to change for him to support Medicaid expansion or what language he would support in Utah healthcare reform legislation. Hughes answered ambiguously, talking about redirecting existing money without saying what he would cut to do so.

Hughes repeated that it may seem callous to talk about "math" when discussing such a sensitive subject, but that the math is important.

Another audience member told Hughes he should pass something that expands Medicaid, even if it's not perfect, then work to correct the laws imperfections rather than blocking any legislation. In a glimmer of hope for

those who would support Medicaid expansion, Hughes said he and his conservative colleagues may do that.

Both Hughes and Shiozawa said lawmakers are committed to wrapping up this issue, and Slonaker said the conversation left him feeling optimistic that the commitment is more than lip-service.

In the end, attendees of the conference got a lunch and a lot of information, including where they can turn when trying to navigate the complicated medical insurance world.

Enrollment USA marketing director Gabriela Benitez told the audience that many people avoid signing up for insurance because they don't understand the subsidies available to them. She also said that many people who have insurance won't seek out medical care, even in an emergency, because they feel uncertain about how much they could owe.

Emergency room physician Geoff Crockett echoed those concerns saying that he is asked by patients regularly how much a procedure he orders is going to cost. He says it frustrates him that he cannot answer. Because of the way hospitals and insurance companies negotiate, he says the questions are impossible for him to answer. That unknown, he says, has patients questioning and sometime declining his orders.

"I don't know what an MRI costs," he said. "What you don't want to do, is you don't want to restrict access to care."

Health Insight Utah is distributing booklets to help Spanish speakers in Utah raise their level of "health IQ," according to project coordinator Allie Miraglia. She suggested teaching grade-school kids some medical basics could solve a lot of problems, like patients not knowing when to call their doctor or when to head to the ER.

Utah Health Policy Project also runs Take Care Utah, which specializes in helping people get enrolled through the federal healthcare marketplace, setup by the Affordable Care Act.

Take Care Utah Director Randall Serr says the easiest way to get answers in Utah is to pick up your phone and dial 2-1-1 - where you can directly reach the Utah Health Policy Project. Serr says they have never gotten a question they either couldn't answer or couldn't refer to someone else who could.