

Guest Opinion/Editorial

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Legislature Should Support Full Medicaid Expansion

By Dan Perdue
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As legislators prepare for 40 days of work in Cheyenne, perhaps no issue they will face will loom as large as the reform of Wyoming's Medicaid program.

Lawmakers will surely also face tough decisions regarding highway funding and education accountability, among others. But with a single program costing the state some \$500 million each year, Medicaid reform and related healthcare issues will be front and center.

In considering how to provide care for Wyoming's citizens while controlling program costs, the Legislature should support the full expansion of Medicaid that is allowed under the Affordable Care Act.

Under the ACA, Wyoming must cover an estimated 10,600 newly eligible children and others who are currently eligible but have not enrolled. Legislators now must decide whether to add another 17,600 low-income adults, for a total of 28,200 new enrollees if the program were fully expanded.

The federal government would cover all of these costs for the first three years, and never less than 90 percent of those costs.

There are at least three key reasons that legislators should support the full expansion.

First, the full expansion is good for Wyoming's patients. One of the surest ways to improve overall health and control costs is for patients to receive the right care, from the right provider, at the right time.

Providing coverage for more than 28,000 Wyoming citizens – often described as the working poor – will provide that access to care. We know that patients who receive preventive care, or who receive care earlier, tend not to be as sick when they do need care.

By contrast, a study conducted by the Hospital Industry Data Institute and funded by the Wyoming Hospital Association, indicated that uninsured patients who visited Wyoming hospitals in 2012 were generally older than Medicaid patients, and they were more likely to have one or more chronic conditions.

In other words, the very uninsured population that the Medicaid expansion would cover is aging, sick, and, as a result, costly. Expanding coverage is the right step for improving the health of this sizeable group of Wyoming citizens.

Second, the full expansion could save the state \$47 million over six years, according to a study released by the Department of Health. These savings can only be achieved, however, if the Legislature supports the full expansion of the program.

Finally, the full expansion will help ensure that Wyoming's providers can continue to provide care for our vulnerable populations. In 2011, Wyoming hospitals provided about \$200 million in uncompensated care – up from about \$126 million in 2007.

At the same time, federal assistance for hospitals that treat large numbers of low-income and uninsured patients has been slashed.

The impact of both the dramatic growth in uncompensated care and the reductions in this federal assistance would be significantly offset through the full Medicaid expansion.

We recognize that our legislators face a number of difficult issues in the upcoming session, and few decisions will be clear-cut. But the full expansion of Medicaid simply makes sense, for our patients, our state, and our providers.

About the WHA

The Wyoming Hospital Association is a statewide association dedicated to providing leadership, representation and advocacy for Wyoming hospitals. The WHA promotes information and education that supports Wyoming hospitals in delivering high-quality health care that is accessible to all Wyoming citizens. For more information, visit the WHA web site at www.wyohospitals.com.

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