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Charles 'Hugh' Shields: Missouri shuns Medicaid expansion at expense of working poor

Dec 25, 2016



Interactive maps of the U.S. showing the status of medically uninsured adults are available from The New York Times. One can get a good overall view of changes in percent of uninsured for the years 2013 through 2016, and one can view each county's percent of uninsured.

Each county is colored a shade of blue ranging from light blue (low percentage of uninsured) to dark blue (high percentage of uninsured). Moving from 2013 to 2016, we see the country overall becoming lighter blue, but we also see states such as Missouri and Oklahoma in 2016 continue to stand out as dark blue. The reason for the high percentage of uninsured: failure to expand Medicaid for the working poor. They don't make enough to afford private health insurance under the Affordable Care Act but make too much to qualify for the state's Medicaid program. They fall into the "coverage gap."

The interactive map for 2016 shows Jasper, Newton and McDonald counties in Southwest Missouri to have uninsured rates of 16 percent, 16 percent and 22 percent, respectively. Their neighbors in Kansas (Crawford at 11 percent and Cherokee with 14 percent) and Oklahoma (Ottawa at 26 percent and Delaware with 22 percent) didn't fare much better.

What do these three states have in common? They have all refused to expand Medicaid to the working poor (Kansas is starting to come around to the economic and societal benefits, at least taking a look at expanding Medicaid).

How does Missouri compare with Arkansas, which has implemented a version of the expanded Medicaid provision of the Affordable Care Act? McDonald, Barry and Stone counties in Southwest Missouri are 22 percent, 17 percent and 14 percent, respectively, while south of the state border, Benton and Carroll counties in Arkansas posted 7 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Although the contrast in uninsured rates is significant between Missouri and Arkansas, the contrast with our neighbors becomes more pronounced if we move over to the Bootheel region.

Scott and Mississippi counties near the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, then New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin counties down in the Bootheel score 12 percent, 20 percent, 15 percent, 22 percent and 16 percent, respectively, while directly across the river in Kentucky we have Ballard, Carlisle, Hickman and Fulton counties weighing in with 7 percent, 7 percent, 9 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

Note that all of the river counties in southern Illinois are in single digits and that Illinois, dominated by Democratic Chicago, has ACA-expanded Medicaid for its working poor. I contrast the Missouri Bootheel with its neighbors in Illinois and Kentucky because the populations are similar rural river communities (tending to be low income) but have markedly different medical insurance offerings to the working poor.

Kentucky elected to go with expanded Medicaid several years ago, and the results have been dramatic. Signups for Kentucky's expanded Medicaid have been 435,000 people, while creating thousands of medical-related jobs. This program brings health insurance to Kentucky's working poor and is financed 90-10 by the federal government, meaning Kentucky will participate with \$1.2 billion over the next five years, while the federal government will contribute \$10.8 billion over the same period.

Meanwhile, Missouri is not seeing this kind of money circulating in its economy, and the working poor in Missouri are left to manage as in most Deep South states.

The old saw given for not bringing expanded Medicaid to Missouri is that Obamacare will be repealed once President-elect Donald Trump takes office. However, with expanded Medicaid for the working poor already in place in 31 states, repeal will not be so easy.

Certain provisions (prior medical conditions, children to age 26) available because of the ACA are popular and will not be easily handed back to the insurance companies.

The picture is clear: If you have a friend or acquaintance who is among the working poor, advise him to move to Arkansas, where medical insurance is available. Missouri chooses to be among those flyover states that refuse to bring in Obamacare, even if it costs the state dearly.

Charles "Hugh" Shields lives in Joplin.

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Dec 26, 2016

It's only politics that the poors must suffer after all they are the favorite target of the Republicans who shame and demonize them at every opportunity. Even the despicable Chamber of Commerce (working to screw the middle class at every opportunity) think expanding Medicaid would produce jobs and benefits for Missouri!!!! Did you vote for your politician to send them to Jefferson City to make the poors worse off. Did they mention that in their campaign literature?? No?? Well wake up goober you've been used.

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