

Dottie Elbert: Show me support: Close the coverage gap

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Does everyone in Southwest Missouri own a chainsaw in working order and readily at hand? You've got to love the backbone in our community.

On May 22, 2011, a third of Joplin was wiped out by an EF-5 tornado. As if out of nowhere, saw-wielding heroes appeared, clearing debris from the streets despite many obstacles. Thanks to their work, emergency and rescue first responders would be able to continue their work throughout what soon became known as "The Zone."

If you still had a house with a spare bed, it was quickly offered. People who didn't have additional room found ways to take folks regardless, and built shelters wherever possible for survivors and the hundreds of volunteers that appeared before dawn. Tents went up in and around the outskirts of "The Zone." Joplin was devastated, and people came to help.

The stages of disaster are something that I had never thought about before that summer. Our needs changed daily, varying from food, water, shelter to tarps, tape and storage containers. Volunteers kept coming, adapting to the heat, lack of restrooms and the seemingly endless hard work set before them. Most volunteers could sense the needs of the many people on the ground who themselves needed relief. They prayed with us, worked alongside us, and became a part of our story.

The city of Joplin, and more importantly, the lives of its residents still need help. Sure, the street signs are back, and Joplin is looking beautiful, at least on the surface. Behind the fresh paint and new fences, people struggle.

My own experience doing tornado relief work opened my eyes to the challenges that have faced many of our community members before, during and after the tornado, especially the need for better access to health care. The dangers for those unable to get medical care are many. From job loss to bankruptcy, depression, disability, homelessness and death, the reality is dim. The stories I heard while doing tornado relief work changed me and inspired me to work to improve access to health care.

I still hear stories of folks suffering from anxiety and flashbacks, triggered by the wind, rain and loud noises. I visit people who have uncontrolled blood pressure and a high chance of stroke and heart disease. For others, the loss of work due to untreated illnesses is the biggest setback. I've met a 33-year-old mom, considering applying for disability in a desperate attempt to get necessary back surgery because she has no other source for help or healing. People are not able to get maintenance medication to treat diabetes or depression. Often these responsible people work untreated because they cannot afford to stop or get well.

The working poor are members of this community who find themselves in the Medicaid "coverage gap," with no access to affordable health insurance. You may never know these problems exist because they remain unheard and unresolved in the lives of people who help care for our young and old, cut our hair and mow our lawns.

They are our friends, neighbors and relatives. They are vital members of this community, and their sufferings and setbacks are real, even if they don't show it on the outside.

Now is the time for the Show-Me State to show some love and support to those in the coverage gap. Did you know that 1.9 people on average die in Missouri every day because of lack of health care? We could save 700 lives every year by closing the coverage gap and giving people access to health care. Our Missouri Legislators have the power to transform the lives of many Missourians by reforming our Medicaid program so those who need help can get it.

The chainsaws have mostly quieted, but the need for heroic action to save lives remains.

Closing Missouri's coverage gap will prevent unnecessary deaths and improve the quality of life for 300,000 Missourians who struggle without access to health insurance. Even better, closing this gap will create jobs right here in Southwest Missouri, and is paid for with no tax increases.

Show me improved access to health insurance, and I will show you a healthier, happier community.

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