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Medicaid expansion, Obamacare reform and PDMP databases take center stage at political events

Will Schmitt, WSCHMITT@NEWS-LEADER.COM 7:43 p.m. CDT October 25, 2016



(Photo: Will Schmitt/News-Leader)

Two weeks out from the Nov. 8 election, health care — and whether Missouri should expand Medicaid as part of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act — was the focus of two political discussions in Springfield.

Local legislative candidates and candidates for lieutenant governor weighed in on whether the state should accept federal funds to extend health insurance coverage during a Monday night forum hosted by the Greene County Medical Society.

There, moderator and family practice physician Jim Blaine prompted the political hopefuls to explain their positions on Medicaid expansion and a proposed prescription drug monitoring program. Missouri is the only state in the nation without a database to track purchases of painkillers and other drugs that can lead to addiction and overdose.

Tuesday morning, Democratic gubernatorial candidate and Attorney General Chris Koster fielded questions at a roundtable at Jordan Valley Community Health Center, where Medicaid expansion questions were mixed in with inquiries about what a new "Missouri model" for health care might look like.

Missouri is one of 19 states not participating in the voluntary expansion of Medicaid provided for in the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as "Obamacare." Under a provision in the act, the federal government offered to fully cover the cost of making Medicaid available to more people for three years, with federal support dropping to 95 percent in 2017 and 90 percent in 2020.

The [Missouri Hospital Association](https://missourihealthmatters.com/app/uploads/2014/03/2-Billion-Report_Feb2014.pdf) (https://missourihealthmatters.com/app/uploads/2014/03/2-Billion-Report_Feb2014.pdf) has pegged Missouri's share at \$2 billion if it had opted into the program. [Budget estimates from Missouri's Office of Administration](http://oa.mo.gov/sites/default/files/Medicaid%20Expansion%20Savings%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf) (<http://oa.mo.gov/sites/default/files/Medicaid%20Expansion%20Savings%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>) show that the state could have saved almost \$1 billion in general revenue over eight years if Missouri had started accepting federal dollars in 2014.

Koster compared the decision not to participate to ripping up a check and said partisan politics are to blame. He also believes that participating Medicaid expansion would create about 40,000 jobs over five years in Missouri.

Obamacare has been roundly criticized by Republicans, however, and several of those at the Monday forum argued against expanding any part of the health care overhaul, a hallmark of Obama's administration.

The program has been in the spotlight recently, with the number of health insurance providers in Missouri dropping as the plans on offer have become more expensive. Just this week, the federal government confirmed that premiums for popular plans bought through Obamacare would increase by 25 percent on average in 2017, the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/average-premiums-for-popular-aca-plans-rising-25-percent/2016/10/24/3adbb734-9a12-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_acarates-720pm-b%3Ahomepage%2Fstory) reported. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/average-premiums-for-popular-aca-plans-rising-25-percent/2016/10/24/3adbb734-9a12-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_acarates-720pm-b%3Ahomepage%2Fstory)

Conservatives also worry that if Missouri opts in, the federal government might alter the deal, trapping the state in a bad bargain.

Koster, a conservative Democrat and former Republican state senator, tried to soothe those concerns by presenting himself as understanding about conservative critiques and willing to negotiate with the Republican majorities in both chambers of the state legislature.

"Yes, the Affordable Care Act needs fixing. Yes, there are things that need to be fixed," Koster said. "But that is a federal issue. That is for (Missouri Sens.) Roy Blunt and Claire McCaskill to work on, and we call upon them to work on those things in a bipartisan way."

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"But when the federal government is offering the state of Missouri \$1 billion when they are saying if we put up a dime, they'll put up 90 cents, and we'll do that 2 billion times, and we'll do that 2 billion times a year as far as the eye can see, we should lift our heads up and consider this opportunity."

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Koster went on to say that "if the federal government breaks its word, even by a penny, when I am fine with writing it into the statute that we will withdraw and reconsider everything."

Eric Greitens, the Republican running for governor, has made no bones about his distaste for the Affordable Care Act and has criticized Koster for wanting to "expand Obamacare."

Koster told the roundtable he was concerned that Greitens was "purposely conflating" the separate issues of accepting federal money to increase Medicaid opportunities and creating some larger manifestation of Obamacare.

Koster answered affirmatively when asked whether a "new Missouri model" would have to be crafted in order to create healthcare reform that placated the Republican-dominated legislature. If the legislature accepted the federal Medicaid dollars, Koster said he would be willing to work with them on issues including requiring those on Medicaid to seek employment, along with some "type of agreement on managed care (<https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/managed-care/index.html>)."

One conservative criticism (<https://americansforprosperity.org/9-reasons-not-to-expand-medicaid/>) that came up at the forum Monday was that if Missouri accepted Medicaid expansion, it would increase the federal deficit.

Asked by a reporter for a response, Koster downplayed that line of thinking.

"The reliance on Missouri's role has obviously been elevated in the Republican rationale as other objections have fallen away, and no, I don't think that is a rational position for the state of Missouri to take," Koster said. "It is not our responsibility to make volunteer donations to the federal deficit above and beyond what other states are making."

Legislative candidates share views

The argument that accepting Medicaid would increase the deficit was one point made by Steve Helms, a Republican running against Democrat Randy Alberhasky in the 135th District, during the Greene County Medical Society forum

Like Koster, Alberhasky said his support for Medicaid expansion was based on economic considerations. Based on his years as a trial attorney, Alberhasky said he thought Medicaid expansion would help injured and disabled workers get back to work — and start paying more in taxes.

Helms was critical of the Affordable Care Act as a whole, saying that President Barack Obama instituted the law to fundamentally change America and was responsible for politicizing the issue.

Helms went on to identify three major flaws he sees with Medicaid — low provider reimbursement rates, "extremely burdensome" regulations and payment delays — on top of his argument that Medicaid expansion would increase budgetary trouble in Washington.

"Medicaid expansion is being paid for on the backs of our children and grandchildren and the expansion of the federal deficit," Helms said.

Increased pricing transparency, more direct primary care, tort reform and allowing out-of-state insurance companies to enter the Missouri market were among the solutions Helms offered.

His stance went against the prevailing opinion of the doctors in the room, most of whom appeared to support Medicaid expansion.

John Mihalevich, a Springfield physician, told Helms he thought he was "fundamentally misconstruing what the Affordable Care Act was all about."

"It was actually about insurance reform and Medicaid expansion," Mihalevich told Helms. "... To block that basically blocked a sort of experimentation into what would be the best ways to deliver health care to the country."

Helms stayed calm as Mihalevich called him "not very well informed" on Medicaid expansion.

The Republican candidate replied that "fundamentally, we can't afford it," again citing the federal deficit.

"That's your opinion," Mihalevich retorted.

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The exchange was emblematic of the night's proceedings, with Republican candidates either hesitating to endorse or openly criticizing Medicaid expansion while physicians and Democrats advocated on its behalf. The pattern was repeated to a lesser extent when candidates were asked whether Missouri should become the 50th state in the union to adopt a prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP).

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Thomas Quinn, a Republican running in the 132nd District, introduced the issue as a blue-collar guy who had seen poverty firsthand, having left middle school to go to work. He questioned whether a PDMP was necessary and, when speaking about Medicaid expansion, likened expanding the existing program to building extra floors on the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

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Crystal Quade, the Democrat opposing Quinn, stressed that it was important to have a bipartisan solution when it comes to health care. Like Quinn, she spoke of the need to reform the existing system, but she supports adding a PDMP and expanding Medicaid.

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Former U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, a Democrat running for lieutenant governor, was the first to speak, calling Medicaid expansion critical and saying that adding a PDMP should be a "no-brainer."

Carnahan's Republican opponent, state Sen. Mike Parson, did not attend but sent a surrogate, physician Sam Alexander, in his stead. Alexander cautioned that "we do need some reassurances" when it comes to taking federal money, as is the case with Medicaid expansion.

Nate Branscom, a Democrat running against incumbent Republican Rep. Sonya Anderson in the 131st District, spoke in favor of Medicaid expansion and said that when it came to adding a PDMP, "we can take the good from every other state."

Anderson and Republican Rep. Kevin Austin of District 136 were not present Monday night.

Jeff Munzinger, Austin's Democratic opponent, supports expanding Medicaid and doing more to prevent prescription drug overdoses. He said expanding Medicaid could save hundreds of Missourians from dying prematurely each year.

"I just think that's terrible," Munzinger said. "If somebody is drowning in the swimming pool, we'll throw them a life preserver. If they're in a burning car, we'll do our best to pull them out."

In the 133rd District race, Democrat and former AARP regional volunteer director Jim Clemmons said that when he was with the retirees' association, "we absolutely gave up on Medicaid expansion" because it was a waste of time from the group's perspective.

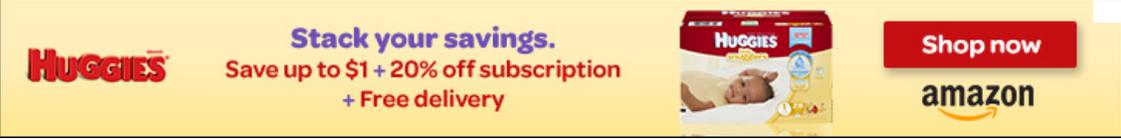
Republican Curtis Trent, a former deputy chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Billy Long, differed from Clemmons in that he had economic qualms about Medicaid expansion and privacy concerns about a PDMP.

Rep. Elijah Haahr, a Springfield Republican representing the 134th District, supports adding a PDMP. When it comes to expanding Medicaid, he said he wasn't a "hard yes or a hard no" but doesn't believe there's adequate money to expand Medicaid in Missouri.

Angela Dowler Pryor, a Democrat challenging Haahr, relayed a story of a star player on her son's high school football team who became addicted to opioids and overdosed as her rationale for supporting a PDMP. She also spoke of the need to increase Medicaid coverage.

Question? Comments? Feedback? The reporter can be reached via email (wschmitt@news-leader.com), by phone (417-836-1194) and on Twitter (@ws_missouri).

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