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Missouri Democratic Party brings health care plan to town

By Ines Kagubare and Crystal Thomas news@joplinglobe.com Sep 28, 2017



As Republicans shape the health care debate on the Missouri and national fronts, the Missouri Democratic Party this week brought its vision for health care to different parts of the state.

"The Republican path is cuts to services that increase cost and reduce quality of care," party Chairman Stephen Webber said in Joplin. "There's other ways to improve care. We can't cut our way to quality care."

In the last year, millions of dollars have been cut from Medicaid and health care programs to balance Missouri's state budget after revenue shortfalls, and Congress has made three pushes to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, all of which have failed.

Webber unveiled the party's eight-part plan Wednesday to an audience of 10 people at the local electrical workers union hall in Joplin. The plan includes reversing several decisions made by Republican state lawmakers within the last eight years.

The plan included offering individuals ability to purchase Medicaid to have more competitive options for insurance, while also fully expanding Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act. When the act first became law in 2010, expansion of Medicaid was proposed, with the federal government picking up the tab for a few years.

Missouri chose not to fully expand Medicaid. The thinking was that the health care law would soon be repealed. Despite not expanding eligibility, the cost of the program to the state has grown in the past couple of years because of high prescription prices and more enrolled children.

Krista Stark, executive director of the Southwest Missouri Democrats, said expanding Medicaid would cover those under the coverage gap who cannot necessarily buy into the state's health care exchange because they don't qualify for the subsidies under the Affordable Care Act.

"I've seen how hard hit people have been by that," she said.

About 260,000 Missourians would have access to Medicaid if eligibility were fully expanded, Webber said. Currently, the federal government covers 90 percent of the cost of fully expanding Medicaid. Citing figures from Republican lawmakers, Webber said that expanding the program would save the state \$80 million in general revenue that could be put toward other health care programs that have been cut.

Webber said the savings could be put toward re-establishing the \$12 million Missouri Rx program. The program lowered prescription costs for seniors and was cut from this year's budget.

In an interview, Webber said the party chose to bring its plan to people all over the state, not areas that have just voted blue, to be "proactive" and show people that they have other options.

"After (last) November, I think a lot of people are stunned at the viciousness of these policies," Webber said, citing fallout of various plans to replace the Affordable Care Act.

Democrats also endorsed creating a prescription drug monitoring program in order to fight the opioid epidemic. They also wanted to participate in the federal Family Planning Program in Medicaid. To do so, the state would have to reverse a decision made by the Legislature two years ago that forbade any Medicaid dollars going to Planned Parenthood.

Karen Riley, 59, of Carthage, came to hear the presentation not only for herself, as a woman with a pre-existing condition, but also as the Jasper County Democratic Central Committee chairwoman. Riley was born with a birth defect in an eye socket known as arteriovenous malformation, which affects her vision. The Affordable Care Act has made it so that she isn't charged more because she has a pre-existing condition and has allowed her two children to stay on her insurance until they are 26.

"What happens does affect me, and I'm here to hear what they have to say," she said, adding that she hoped to share the party's plan with others.

Rep. Scott Fitzpatrick, R-Shell Knob, who chairs the House Budget Committee, said he wouldn't agree with expanding Medicaid because of the heavy spending the state would have to allocate. Fitzpatrick is in the midst of finding a way to generate \$35 million to reverse cuts made to in-home and nursing home aid to balance the budget this year. To reverse the cuts, Fitzpatrick said, he hoped to present a plan that would reduce access to the "circuit breaker" tax credit used by senior homeowners and renters.

Any prescription drug monitoring program that was created by the Legislature should be voluntary for doctors, Fitzpatrick said.

"It could be helpful, but it's not going to fix the problem," he said, referring to other states that have implemented the program and still have an opioid crisis.

In an interview, Rep. Bill White, R-Joplin, agreed with some portions of the Democratic plan, including fighting the opioid crisis and funding the Missouri Rx program, but was adamantly against expanding Medicaid because of the cost to the state. He was skeptical that allowing individuals to buy into Medicaid would increase competition because insurance companies most likely wouldn't create a counterpart that would decrease their profit, he said.

"It would be financially lucrative," White said. "Insurance companies are in the business of making money."

Rep. Cody Smith, R-Carthage, said the Democratic plan didn't flesh out how the state would pay for Medicaid expansion while being financially responsible.

"It's a lot of talking points and platitude," Smith said.

Skepticism

Asked for reactions, most area GOP lawmakers reached by the Globe were skeptical of the plausibility of the Democratic plan.

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