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## State gears up to implement federal health care reform law

BOISE — While a proposed “nullification” bill would stop state agencies and officials from implementing the federal health care reform law, those same people and departments are busy at the moment doing just that.

“We are really busy because of the health care reform act,” Idaho Department of Insurance Director Bill Deal told members of the Idaho Chamber Alliance recently. “It’s taken a lot of people to keep up with the requirements of the health care reform act already.”

But the department has a long way to go to meet all the requirements, added Deal, who has worked in the insurance industry for 46 years, served eight terms in the Idaho House of Representatives and co-chaired the Idaho Legislature’s Legislative Health Care Task Force for nine years.

In the near term, Idaho must have a plan in place by July that offers health insurance for people with pre-existing conditions. While it was assumed states would be slammed with people applying for those plans, that hasn’t happened yet, Deal said.

At the end of November, only 69 Idahoans had applied for that type of insurance plan. “That was far short of what we anticipated the number of participants would be,” he said, noting that only 10,000 people have applied around the nation. “We thought we would have that many in Idaho.”

Among the department’s tasks is converting 39,000 policies and forms to conform to the health care reform act, which became law last March.

But the biggest task by far is putting in place by 2014 a so-called health care exchange, which is really the backbone of President Barack Obama’s health care reform act. An exchange is basically a state-managed marketplace where people not covered through their employer can shop for health insurance at competitive rates.

These exchanges are the cornerstone of the federal health care reform law and federal subsidies will be available to help eligible people purchase plans from them Deal said it’s expected most Idahoans will get their health insurance from these exchanges because of the federal subsidies, and implementing such a system is an enormous task.

Of the \$2 million in grant money Idaho has been awarded to implement the health care reform act, \$1 million is to help offset the cost of setting up the Gem State’s exchange.

“This is labor intensive,” Deal said, adding that the department has added a couple of consultants to seek recommendations from companies, insurance agents and citizens to devise a plan that “can be tailored for Idaho.”

Deal told chamber members that while Idaho is among the 27 states fighting the federal health care reform act in court, he's been directed to proceed with plans to meet federally mandated requirements associated with the plan until further notice. law — it has 25 House and Senate co-sponsors and easily passed out of committee — all of that would come to a halt.

That would put Idaho behind the 8-ball in implementing the plan and that's precisely the idea, Sen. Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, one of the bill's co-sponsors, told fellow lawmakers during a public hearing on the bill last week.

Pearce said it could take two years before the matter is ultimately decided by the U.S. Supreme Court and by that time the federal plan would be too deeply entrenched in the nation's soul to root it out even if the court rules against it.

As every day passes and states continue their work to implement it, the plan "is incorporated deeper and deeper into the heart and soul of the nation," he said. "This is really the only way to slow it down in the state of Idaho."

While some people are concerned about Idaho having to

If the nullification bill becomes turn the \$2 million granted by the federal government, bill co-sponsor Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, told lawmakers that Idaho has only received and spent \$75,000 of that total so far.

Barbieri said the federal act would cost Idaho at least \$228 million and he rejected the notion that it would be overly costly to defend the state's stance in court. "The cost of defending the state's citizens is minimal in comparison to the costs of implementing this plan," he said.

Democrats in the Idaho Legislature have sharply criticized the nullification bill and have publicly called out Republicans who support it, asking them during public meetings what their plan is to provide health insurance coverage to Idahoans.

During a public hearing last week, Rep. Phylis King, D-Boise, told Pearce that 250,000 Idahoans are uninsured and another 250,000 are under-insured. She said the current system is broke and the bill won't help matters.

"Do you have a health care plan for the people of Idaho?" she said. "It's criminal how we treat the uninsured. We can't continue this system. We have to come up with a plan."