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Idaho joins 27 other states in seeking local solutions to health care issues

For millions of people, Medicaid has become a lifeline — more important in many ways than family or community. For some, it is a profit center. For others, it is a nightmare of bureaucracy, entitlement, and too often disappointment.

Nationally, health care costs continue grabbing headlines, and the issue will be a major part of the 2012 political debate.

Meanwhile, Idaho and other states are working hard to create publicprivate health care partnerships and foster local solutions — and along the way to nudge the national Medicaid reform discussion toward common sense and reality.

Many aspects of our health care system are linked to Medicaid, the taxpayer-funded health benefits program for those meeting eligibility criteria including poverty and disability. Idaho and other states have been grappling with the complexities and challenges of this massive government program and its federal mandates since the 1960s. Medicaid cost the state of Idaho nearly \$359 million in the fiscal year ending July 1, and it will take up a projected 18 percent of Idaho’s General Fund budget in the new fiscal year.

That’s to say nothing of how much it costs Idahoans in federal tax dollars every year.

In May, U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah and Congressman Fred Upton of Michigan sent a letter to all governors asking for feedback on the challenges they face and for ideas on how to make Medicaid work better. They cited the fact that both Democrat and Republican governors have expressed the need for Medicaid reform, seeking to replicate the successful model used in overhauling the welfare system in the 1990s.

“Solutions for sustainable welfare reform came from the states — not just Washington — and the same model will work to fix Medicaid,” they wrote. And I couldn’t agree more.

I recently joined 27 other Republican governors in signing a letter responding to the request for input. We agreed first and foremost that Obamacare should be repealed to allow states the opportunity — and the flexibility — to keep addressing our unique health care challenges.

We agreed that Medicaid should be reformed in a comprehensive and sustainable manner, not only to improve care for our nation’s most vulnerable citizens, but also to address the inequities, inefficiencies, excess costs, fraud, waste and abuse that unfortunately are far too prevalent in Medicaid programs across the country.

An expanded report detailing recommendations built upon each state’s input is being developed for Senator Hatch and Congressman Upton.

Idaho's input will be extremely valuable in helping Congress understand how states with smaller populations are impacted by the Medicaid system — through our budgets and the well-being of our citizens — and what we already have found will work to improve it.

Understandably, the news media's focus has been on our legal challenge to Obamacare, confronting an unconstitutional abuse of power and asserting our rights as citizens of a sovereign state. But that's only part of the story. Little attention has been paid to our efforts to more effectively coordinate Idaho initiatives in health care through the work of the Idaho Health Care Council.

I established the council in 2010 to support and implement Idaho's best solutions in making health care more accessible and affordable. Together — patients and physicians, hospitals and insurers, employers and employees — are helping us develop innovative, sustainable and market-based solutions to improve health care right here at home without waiting for federal permission, directives or mandates.

But we're not alone in working to move our health care system in the right direction. I am collaborating with 27 other governors and their states, as well as our congressional delegations, in a unified effort to reform Medicaid in a way that implements proven best practices and leverages both public and private resources.

Our shared goal is to establish and maintain a responsible safety net for our children's and grandchildren's generations without breaking our economy or putting those same generations and beyond even deeper in debt. And we are committed to doing it without giving up our self-determination or freedom.

C.L. "Butch" Otter is governor of Idaho.