

Otter: Plan should address uninsured

With Congress now moving toward tweaking instead of replacing the Affordable Care Act, Gov. Butch Otter said Tuesday that Congress needs to address the issue of those who are still unable to obtain coverage.

The ACA, also known as Obamacare, provided for expanding Medicaid to cover the so-called gap group. Idaho did not opt for expansion. Otter was asked at a session with reporters what he wanted to see Congress do with the program.

“Things are working pretty well here in Idaho, especially with the (state health insurance) exchange,” Otter told reporters at an Idaho Press Club event. “There are still those that don’t like the exchange because it was created under the shadow of Obamacare. And so it’s difficult for me to say right now, but I guess I want flexibility. I want us to be able to model whatever they come up with to fit Idaho.”

He added: “I think whatever the Congress does they’re going to have to do something to close that (coverage) gap.”

Otter touched on several other issues:

Preferences for Christian refugees

He defended his support for the U.S. giving preference to Christian refugees over those of other faiths, saying that he distinguished between preference and discrimination in the executive order on immigration issued last week by President Donald Trump.

“We’re talking about preference here, which the United States has always done,” Otter said. “The United States has always made preference for people that were in peril. When they see a particular group of people creating genocide on others, we created a preference for those.”

Otter initially made remarks supporting Trump’s preference for favoring persecuted Christians in an interview with Idaho Public Television broadcast Friday, acknowledging that such preference was discriminatory. Tuesday he said he “should have not answered that question” and instead said, “I think it’s not discriminatory, I think it’s preference.”

Faith-healing legal exemptions

Otter said he saw no progress in the Legislature this year on addressing faith-healing exemptions in Idaho’s civil and criminal codes that critics say cause needless deaths of children when parents decline to seek medical care for them.

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“I haven’t heard from anybody this year about it,” Otter said, adding that the Legislature had followed through on his request last year to review the issue. A panel of lawmakers met last summer and fall, but did not make recommendations. Otter said he would raise it with legislative leaders at a meeting later this week.

“I don’t know why they arrived at that decision not to do anything, but I asked them to consider it. They considered it. I asked them to put together an interim committee. They put together an interim committee,” he said.

Idaho will appeal sage grouse ruling

Otter said the state would appeal a judge’s January dismissal of Idaho’s lawsuit against federal land-use restrictions aimed at protecting the sage grouse in Idaho and Montana. The court said the state did not have standing to sue, because it had not shown that the restrictions hurt the state.

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