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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Post Register

Idaho Falls, Idaho

Monday Feb. 20, 2017

Dr. Kenneth Krell

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GUEST OPINION: Tipping point for Medicaid expansion

With talk of block grants replacing Medicaid, failing to expand now could forever make Idaho a second class state, writes Kenneth Krell MD.

According to the recently released Idaho Public Policy Survey, conducted in December 2016 by Boise State, 70.8 percent of Idahoans favor the governor and state Legislature taking action to provide the 78,000 low income citizens in the gap with access to quality health care.

That means support for closing the gap has increased about 10 percent from the last poll.

Yet the best the Legislature has proposed so far this session is to take \$10 million from the state's Millennium fund to provide primary care services. That's even less than the \$30 million Otter proposed last year. This would provide about \$125 per gap individual — not even enough to cover recommended screenings and an annual exam.

How would the money be allocated? According to sponsor Rep. Fred Wood R-Burley "Basically on a first-come, first-served basis. As I understand it, that's the way it's going to have to work." So get in line, Idaho poor.

Both the New York Times and the Washington Post have recently essentially ridiculed Idaho's feeble attempts to skirt Medicaid expansion. As the Post said Feb. 9 in a headline, "Republicans in Idaho tried to design a better plan than Obamacare — and failed."

Time may be running out — forever — for Idaho to provide comprehensive coverage for the gap population. On Feb. 16, House Speaker Paul Ryan, two committee chairmen and Tom Price, the new secretary of Health and Human Services, outlined their draconian plan to replace the ACA. Medicaid would be replaced by block grants to the states.

And while the details aren't clear, block grant money would likely be allocated to the states based on present federal dollars, making it likely Idaho and 18 other states that haven't expanded Medicaid would lose forever.

Ryan's paper claims, "On its current path, the Medicaid program in on unsustainable footing."

That's simply not true. A recent Congressional Budget Office Report noted that if current policies are maintained, overall federal spending on healthcare will increase from 5.5 percent of GDP to 8.9 percent by 2046. That's a big jump, but expanded Medicaid would increase from 2.3 percent to 3.1 percent, a modest increase.

Idaho has been here before. As Bryan Clark recently pointed out in the Post Register, because Idaho had very poor welfare funding in 1996 when welfare was turned into a block grant, we have essentially the same federal welfare dollars now as then. So while New York receives \$2600 per child, Idaho receives \$400. And

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poverty in Idaho has increased from 13 percent of citizens below the federal poverty level to 16 percent, and deep poverty from less than 4 percent to more than 6 percent. It's income inequality by state-and fixed forever in federal allocations.

Financially, it's becoming clearer that Medicaid expansion improves states' financial pictures, although of course, block grants could change that total amount of dollars.

Adding 78,000 to Idaho's pool will greatly enhance our long-term Medicaid funding, even if the percentage of per enrollee reimbursement were to drop from 90 percent to 50 percent, as Ryan has proposed.

It won't drop that much-Republican governors who have seen their citizens achieve health coverage won't stand for it.

Meantime 78,000 Idahoans continue to suffer and die — 325 at least per year, nearly one per day, with unfathomable suffering by those who live in constant fear of getting sick with no coverage.

These are our fellow citizens, the majority of whom work, the rest predominately severely disabled. We must not forget their plight. This is not how we treat each other as Idahoans.

So when the legislature is debating \$10 million for healthcare for the poor, tell them no — no way are we going to stand for that mistreatment of hard working and disabled Idaho citizens.

For \$12.2 million, the Legislature can fully expand Medicaid this session. To miss this opportunity may lock us in forever as a second class state. Seventy-one per cent of Idahoans support Medicaid expansion. We must make our voices heard.

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