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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
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by **Bill Dentzer**
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Advocates urge legislators to act on Medicaid gap

Close the Gap Idaho called a late-session rally Thursday to press Idaho lawmakers to act on Medicaid expansion to help people without health insurance, arguing that the GOP-backed health care bill now advancing in Washington, D.C., has removed any remaining reason for Idaho to delay.

The GOP replacement to the Affordable Care Act would maintain Medicaid expansion through 2019 before curtailing any new enrollments. Expansion advocates say Idaho needs to act now to join 31 other states that expanded Medicaid, or the state risks losing out on federal dollars to cover the uninsured and poor.

Under the Republican plan, states that do not expand will vie for a share of \$10 billion set aside over five years to cover their uninsured populations. Each state would receive money based on its share of the total uninsured population in the nonexpansion states, so more populous states would receive more.

Expanding Medicaid in Idaho would help an estimated 78,000 low-income adults who don't qualify for regular Medicaid or for subsidized insurance on the state health exchange. After nearly approving a plan to move toward expansion last year, lawmakers said they would wait to see what emerged from Washington this year.

That replacement plan was released Monday and is moving through committees in Congress in spite of opposition from Republicans, Democrats and outside groups. Idaho's all-Republican Congressional delegation has yet to fully weigh in on the bill, with Rep. Raul Labrador opposing it and the others still deciding.

Whether or not the Republican plan passes, Idaho's expansion advocates said there is no longer any doubt that Medicaid expansion will exist at least through 2019.

"Our Legislature was telling us that they weren't going to act until they got a signal from Congress, and they got that signal from Congress," Elizabeth Woodruff of Close the Gap said Thursday. "For the Legislature to continue to bite around the edges and say they that they're going to use state funds to fund primary care, and they haven't even identified what that funding source is going to be, shows that there's a real opportunity that's being missed."

Woodruff was referring to a Senate bill heard in committee Thursday. The measure resurrects an earlier House bill that failed to win support. It seeks \$10 million from the state's tobacco settlement to cover limited health services and prescriptions for a portion of the uninsured population.

Expansion advocates turned up at the bill hearing before the Senate Health & Welfare committee Thursday but were unable to testify.

"We have studied this enough and it's time to close the coverage gap."

— Dr. Magni Hamso, Terry Reilly Health Services

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