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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Post Register

Idaho Falls, Idaho

Thursday June 22, 2017

by Bryan Clark

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Senate health bill released

After spending weeks rewriting a House version of the American Health Care Act behind closed doors, the Senate has released the 132-page bill shortly ahead of a scheduled vote, expected next week.

The bill makes minor alterations to the House version, while also including steeper cuts to the Medicaid program. Those cuts take place more slowly, but will ultimately be larger in scale than those proposed in the House.

It's unknown how the Senate version will impact the budget, but the House version will make only tacit reductions in the deficit, according to a score by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

The bill has those who work with Idaho's Medicaid program in an uproar, warning that the bill will hurt low-income families, the disabled and the elderly in exchange for tax cuts for wealthy households.

Dr. Ken Krell, former director of critical care at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center, said some effects of the proposal are eminently predictable. Expect more cases like Jenny Steinke's, he warned.

Steinke's case was first reported by the Post Register in 2015. Steinke suffered from asthma, but she and her husband didn't make enough to purchase health insurance despite working full-time, so she relied on rescue inhalers to treat the condition.

Things were looking up. Her husband had a new job, and the couple would soon be able to afford coverage so Jenny could get the care she needed for her chronic health condition. But before that was possible, Steinke, one of 78,000 Idahoans in the Medicaid gap, had an asthma attack that didn't respond to her rescue inhaler. She arrived at the hospital blue from suffocation, with no pulse. Despite efforts to revive her, she died in Krell's intensive care unit.

The rage provoked by watching another patient die of an easily treatable chronic condition, one of dozens of such cases he has seen, drove Krell to become an advocate for Medicaid expansion, an effort that failed despite several years of work. Now, watching the House and Senate versions of the Republican health plan wind their way through the process, Krell has little hope left that things might get better.

"It's making me glad I'm toward the end of my career in medicine," Krell said. "We know it's going to cost several thousand lives a year (nationally). It smashes the hopes that we could reduce the number of unnecessary deaths."

Krell said there are hints of good policy here and there in the bill, such as a proposal to give states more ability to experiment and innovate in their use of Medicaid funds. But the size of the Medicaid cuts will overwhelm any good policy.

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“I think it does make sense to give states more flexibility, but that’s a sham with the size of the decrease in funding,” he said.

That echoes a sentiment expressed by Idaho Medicaid Administrator Matt Wimmer in January, who said that a capped Medicaid block grant would be “a distinct threat to Idaho’s ability to serve its people effectively.”

Krell said there are no provisions in either bill that will do anything about the cost of health care. It will simply limit access to health care among low-income households.

“We’re going to see premiums continue to rise with worse and worse health plans because of reductions in the standards for minimum quality,” he said.

The bill has also sent shockwaves through the developmentally disabled community, which relies heavily on the program to pay for services such as in-home care, therapy and transportation.

Shiloh Blackburn is a 41-year-old woman with cerebral palsy who is confined to a wheelchair. She grew up in Rexburg and today resides in Pocatello. She has earned bachelors degrees in communications and journalism.

Blackburn serves on numerous boards and advisory commissions focused on services for the disabled. And she relies on in-home care to lead an active, independent life. Now she’s worried Medicaid cuts could end that independence.

“I would not be able to be as active and as much a part of the community as I am now,” she said in a phone interview. “My independence, and my ability to help others would be severely curtailed.”

Medicaid also pays for Blackburn’s seizure medication, medication she says she couldn’t afford on her own.

Ian Bott is a 33-year-old Boise man with autism, major depression and anxiety. He receives 10 hours of in-home health care services each week.

“The home- and community-based services I’m on, I’m able to have transportation,” he said in a phone interview. “I’m able to go to therapy once a week, which is important for my emotional well-being.”

Those services allow him to lead an independent life, he said, rather than being confined to a nursing facility.

“We’re talking about human beings, individual people who really need these services to live productive lives,” Bott said.

The release of the Senate plan has taken the disabled community from worried to panicked.

“We had significant concerns with the House version, and now we see what the Senate has done. It will completely decimate this community,” said Christine Pisani, executive director of the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities.

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The changes won't save money, Pisani argues, because when the developmentally disabled lose in-home care, they usually have to enter nursing homes. Since they can't make income while living in nursing homes and services there are more expensive, taxpayers simply foot a bigger bill.

The state of Idaho has worked for 35 years to build a system of community-based services for the developmentally disabled centered on Medicaid funding, Pisani said. The American Health Care Act promises to wipe it out in one fell swoop.

Liz Woodruff of Close the Gap Idaho said one of the biggest concerns with the bill is that it's being rushed ahead with no time to fully evaluate the impacts of the legislation on the local level. Preliminary calculations her group has done suggest that the Senate version of the bill could result in a \$1 billion shift from the federal government to the state government for Medicaid services. She said that's a bill the state couldn't possibly foot. But with so little time before a Senate vote it's unlikely the bill's full impact will be known before it becomes law.

"We're worried that there are adverse effects to Idaho that can't be analyzed and understood by next week. There may be irreparable harm," she said.

Most Medicaid recipients in Idaho, those who stand to lose from cuts, are children: about 208,000 of 278,000 recipients statewide.

The Senate bill was written entirely in secret, with no public hearings and no opportunity for public comment. Most Republican senators reportedly got their first chance to read the bill Thursday, with a vote expected next week.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., took to Twitter to criticize what he called "rushed, secret legislation."

The House's version of the bill is expected to leave 23 million more Americans uninsured in the next decade. The Senate's bill has yet to be scored by the CBO, which writes such estimates. A score is expected shortly before the Senate votes on the measure.

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