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by Xavier Ward

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MIND THE GAP: Bipartisan group delivers 70K signatures for Medicaid expansion

Provided there are no issues in verifying petition signatures, Medicaid expansion will be on the ballot in November.

This comes after a crowd hand-delivered roughly 70,000 petition signatures to the Idaho Secretary of State's office Friday following a rally. Rally organizers estimated that roughly 200 people attended.

The initiative was spearheaded by Idahoans for Healthcare, co-chaired by Nampa GOP Rep. Christy Perry and Reclaim Idaho's Emily Strizich, a Moscow progressive.

While the two describe each other as sitting on opposite ends of the political spectrum, they agree on expanding Medicaid to close a gap between the insurance exchange and those eligible for Medicaid.

"It's a grassroots effort, this was brought on by Idahoans who were frustrated by no movement toward being able to cover the gap population," Perry said.

"At a state level, we're paying for this anyway," she said.

While Medicaid expansion has seen opposition from conservatives, Perry believes it's an issue that will receive bipartisan support, noting that she believes it to be a fiscally responsible measure that will prevent the state from massive emergency costs.

Perry said the roughly 62,000 Idahoans in the Medicaid gap end up costing the state and counties through indigent services and the Catastrophic Health Care Fund.

She pointed to Montana's successes with its Medicaid expansion.

"When the gap population don't have access to the kind of that more natural, normal preventive medicine, then they're being forced, and we're forcing them, to seek care at an emergency level," she said.

Should the measure pass in November, Perry said the state would be reimbursed at a 90-to-10 rate for all of the costs incurred in the last year.

"I think overall you're going to see a savings at the county level through the indigent funds being spent there, you're going to see a savings at the CAT fund, which is money that the state pays, you're going to save money through the SHIP initiative that we have, and you're going to save money by paying at a lower rate for this particular population," Perry said. The SHIP program is a state initiative to improve health care delivery.

Strizich shares a similar sentiment.

"Health care is such a human issue, that to me this is really galvanizing for people," she said.

She told the crowd Friday that in her tour around the state, she encountered a number of conservative, small-government minded people who, after short conversations about expanding Medicaid, were in support.

To demonstrate how it could affect people's lives, organizers invited Josh and Pamela Blessinger to speak at the rally.

Josh Blessinger, a Marine Corps veteran with a number of combat-related disabilities, said that expanding Medicaid would change his family's ability to get necessary care — an issue that has caused them to consider moving to another state.

“Fortunately, I’ve got the VA. They take really good care of me,” he said. “The same can’t be said for my wife.”

His wife, Pamela Blessinger, has a medical condition that requires surgery, but the couple said they can’t afford it because they fall into the gap between Medicaid and the insurance exchange.

As a result, she has worked with a number of research clinics to get the care she needs. She did not specify what her condition is.

“Not to say that’s wrong, but I don’t think that’s fair that’s the only way I can get help with my issues,” she said.

Outside of her own medical issues, Josh and Pamela Blessinger have two children with special needs.

“Our biggest concern, of course, is always our children’s medical conditions,” she said.

She said they considered moving to Utah, Washington and back to her home state of California for better access to medical care. However, the two consider Idaho home and do not want to leave, Pamela Blessinger said.

Josh Blessinger believes the vote will pass, albeit narrowly.

In May, a poll of 600 Idaho voters was released and showed a 66 percent favorability toward Medicaid expansion. Fifty-three percent of Republican respondents said they would support the measure.

Idaho lawmakers have declined to expand Medicaid for six years, saying they wanted no further involvement with Obamacare after the creation of the state insurance exchange, the Idaho Press previously reported.

Wayne Hoffman, president of libertarian think tank Idaho Freedom Foundation, says the Medicaid expansion campaign is filled with half-truths, and he claims the media is spreading a false narrative.

“It’s a great narrative, filled with heroes, victims, and villains. Unfortunately, it’s also only partially true,” Hoffman wrote on the Freedom Foundation website. “The truth, regrettably, isn’t as interesting to the media as the fiction of scrappy heroes eking out an unlikely victory against formidable forces as lives hung in the balance.”

Strizich told the Idaho Press she expects to see a “disinformation campaign” once the vote grows closer.

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