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**Times-News**

Twin Falls, Idaho

**Thursday Aug. 9, 2018**

**by Gretel Kauffman**

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## Health chair backs Medicaid expansion

BURLEY — The chairman of the state Legislature’s House Health and Welfare Committee is backing a ballot initiative to expand Medicaid in Idaho.

Rep. Fred Wood, a Republican from Burley, confirmed his endorsement Wednesday following an announcement from organizers of the initiative.

“The Legislature’s been struggling with this problem for years,” Wood told the *Times-News*. “And I think that Medicaid expansion under the current program is the best way to address the issue of the gap population not having insurance.” The citizen initiative, which would make more Idahoans in the so-called “gap population” eligible for Medicaid, will appear on the ballot in November, the Idaho Secretary of State’s Office confirmed last month. The gap population includes an estimated 51,000 to 62,000 Idaho residents who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid and too little to qualify for subsidized health insurance on the state’s exchange.

Recent efforts by the Legislature to expand health care coverage for this population have failed, including a 2018 bill that would have let the state apply for two federal waivers: one that would let working poor adults by subsidized health insurance on the state’s exchange, and another that would allow people with severe, expensive illnesses to get insurance from Medicaid.

Supporters of the plan said it would have provided coverage to an estimated 35,000 Idahoans in the gap.

The bill died on the House floor in the final weeks of the session, when Wood made a motion to send it back to committee. Wood said at the time that the bill did not have enough support in the Legislature to pass in the 2018 session, and argued that stalling rather than voting on the legislation would increase the chances that a similar proposal resurfaces in future sessions.

“This is a wonderful concept,” Wood said on the floor. “But we have to play the long-term game here. This bill will not go anywhere this year, never was going to go anywhere this year.”

When asked by the *Times-News* Wednesday why the Legislature has struggled to address the gap population, Wood said he was “not sure.”

“I would refer you to the other legislators to ask them that,” he said.

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