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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Post Register

Idaho Falls, Idaho

Wednesday Nov. 1, 2017

by Dr. Kenneth Krell

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GUEST OPINION: Idaho health care proposal, Part 4 — Who's left out

Many could still be left outside the state's health care exchange under the new Idaho Health Care Plan proposal, writes Dr. Kenneth Krell.

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of five guest op-eds by Dr. Kenneth Krell. Each will examine aspects of the upcoming Idaho Health Care Plan proposal, built in cooperation with Richard Armstrong, former director of the Dept. of Health and Welfare, current DHW leadership and the Idaho Dept. of Insurance.

On Tuesday, Krell wrote about the proposal to use two waivers to help stabilize Idaho's health insurance exchange. Read the first, second and third installments at PostRegister.com.

On Wednesday, Krell discussed the downside of this compromise — that the new Idaho Health Care Plan proposal may leave out many individuals who fall into Idaho's Medicaid "Gap."

Who are the remaining citizens who will still be left without health care coverage and how many are there? Because no one has statistics on this shadowy population, neither answer is clear. Richard Armstrong, retired director of Idaho's Department of Health and Welfare, believes there is a "significant cash economy so they don't file tax returns, but we would have no ideas of the numbers." Also included would be some students, parents who don't work outside the house, and some who choose not to work.

The idea that this program requires taxable income, and thus is limited to the "working poor" has great appeal to the Legislature. But how many of this non-working population are mentally disabled and, thus, unable to work? The number is unknown, but the Department of Health and Welfare serves about 9,000 mentally ill citizens who are not on disability. If they were, they would already be Medicaid eligible.

But how many of those 9,000 do file federal tax returns and thus would be eligible is likewise unknown.

The problem is not lost on Armstrong. "It breaks my heart" he says, "Best would be full expansion, but the Legislature won't go there." So Armstrong believes getting this far would allow him-and the state-to start working on the rest of the uncovered population.

"It's sad not to have an answer for them yet." But Armstrong believes, "It would take some other carve out, maybe another approach, for the mentally ill... There has always been compassion in the Legislature for the mentally ill."

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How many citizens are left ineligible for any assistance? Previous figures have estimated 78,000 in the gap in Idaho, but according to Lori Wolff, deputy director of the Department of Health and Welfare, figures estimate that because of the improving state economy 55,000 are now in the gap, leaving about 18,000 Idahoans uncovered if this plan were enacted.

Armstrong's guess is a total of 58,000 remaining in the gap.

On Friday, we'll examine what chances the proposed Idaho Health Care Plan has of clearing the next hurdles — gaining approval at the state and federal levels.

Krell is an intensivist at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center in Idaho Falls. He has degrees in both journalism and medicine. He can be reached at kkrell1@gmail.com.

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