

S.D. Legislature

Lawmakers Urged To Expand Medicaid

BY CHET BROKAW  
Associated Press

PIERRE — Health care officials and some low-income earners urged South Dakota lawmakers Wednesday to expand Medicaid so thousands of people would be covered by the government-run system, but opponents said an expansion would be too expensive and would interfere with the free market.

Katherine Ruggles, 53, of Pierre, said she can get treatment at a community clinic that bases fees on ability to pay, but she and many others live in fear they will get seriously ill and face a hospital bill they cannot pay. She said she now works only a few hours a week because of chronic health problems.

“We are one medical crisis away from economic disaster that may take us years — or never — to recover from,” Ruggles told a special legislative hearing held to consider the advantages and drawbacks of expanding Medicaid as part of the federal health care overhaul.

Ruggles was one of about 20 people who encouraged lawmakers to expand Medicaid. Only two people testified against the expansion.

“We have to be realistic. The problem with socialism is that sooner or later you run out of other people’s money,” said Florence Thompson, of Caputa, who described herself as a taxpayer.

Republican Gov. Dennis Daugaard has recommended that South Dakota delay a decision on whether to expand Medicaid because he is uncertain the federal government can afford to pay most of the cost. Rather than

expanding Medicaid in 2014, the state could wait until 2015 or 2016, he has said.

Sen. Jean Hunoff, R-Yankton, chairman of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, said she doesn’t know whether this year’s Legislature will decide to expand Medicaid. The decision will likely be made when the state budget is put together in a couple of weeks, she said.

“I think everybody believes it’s the right thing to do in principle. The question that is looming out there is, will there be federal dollars?” Hunhoff said after the hearing.

South Dakota’s Medicaid program now covers about 116,000 children, adults and disabled people. The expanded eligibility would add an estimated 48,000 people, mostly adults without children.

People earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level would be covered by the expansion, which the federal government would fully cover through 2016. The state’s contribution would rise in stages to 10 percent of the medical costs, but it would face substantial extra costs in administrating the larger program.

Health care executives said all patients will continue to pay higher bills if more low-income people are not allowed into Medicaid. They said people without coverage often delay getting medical care until they are very sick and then show up at hospital emergency rooms. Since they cannot afford to pay for expensive emergency care, hospitals have to charge insured patients more to offset losses in charity care, they said.

Hospitals have reported that they are unable to collect about \$90 million a year.

Tim Tracy, chief executive officer of Sanford Health in Vermillion, said the federal health care overhaul required South Dakota hospitals to give up \$470 million in Medicare reimbursements in the next decade to help pay for the expansion of Medicaid. He said Medicaid needs to be expanded not to help hospitals, but instead to help working people who cannot afford health insurance.

Linda Sandvik, a Rapid City nurse, said the Medicaid expansion would help those with diabetes and other problems get care before their conditions get serious.

“It’s going to impact our most vulnerable residents, the sick and the poor. These people are not deadbeats. They are not lazy. They are not milking the system. They are the working poor,” Sandvik said.

At the end of the hearing, committee members were split on the issue.

Rep. Manny Steele, R-Sioux Falls, said expanding Medicaid would help people in the short term, but he does not believe Medicaid expansion and other parts of President Obama’s health care law will make health care affordable in the long term because the federal government is in financial trouble.

“We’re already broke as a nation,” Steele said.

Rep. Steve Hickey, R-Sioux Falls, said he also thinks government will have a hard time paying for the health care overhaul, but he is keeping an open mind on expanding Medicaid.

“If there’s a way to do this and make the dollars fit, I do think we ought to try to take care of as many people we can,” Hickey said.

Homemade Bomb Suspected At Neb. College

NORFOLK, Neb. (AP) — Authorities are investigating the discovery of a suspected homemade bomb at a community college in northeast Nebraska.

The *Sioux City Journal* reports the device was found in a 2-liter bottle Wednesday at Northeast Community College in Norfolk.

Norfolk police evacuated dorms during the investigation. Officials say three similar devices in smaller bottles exploded on campus Tuesday. No one was injured.

Human Trafficking Bills Target Pimps, Johns

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska lawmakers are looking at ways to stop pimps who coerce women and children into prostitution, as well as the johns who solicit them.

Groups that work with human-trafficking victims told the Legislature’s Judiciary Committee Wednesday that the exploitation of women and children, including immigrants, has remained largely unnoticed in Nebraska.

Sens. Amanda McGill of Lincoln and Mark Christensen of Imperial have introduced several bills. The measures would regulate escort agencies, increase penalties for pimping, and publish the names of convicted johns.

McGill says prostitutes are usually targeted for prosecution, when in fact they’re often victims who are lured into the trade with drugs, violence or promises of love.

The bills are LB314, LB255, and LB256

Assault At Casino Leaves Man Critically Injured

RAPID CITY — A fight at a Rapid City casino has left one man critically injured.

Police say the assault happened during an argument between two men Tuesday afternoon at the Hideaway Casino on North Lacrosse Street.

The victim, a 46-year-old man from Rapid City, allegedly hit his head on at ATM machine after he was punched by the other men.

Authorities say the two men appeared to know each other. The suspect fled the casino.

Police say they hope to review security footage from the casino.

Deputy Promoted To Neb. Chief Medical Officer

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The state’s deputy chief medical officer has been promoted to become the chief officer and the director of the Division of Public Health for the Nebraska Health and Human Services Department.

The office of Gov. Dave Heineman announced Wednesday that Dr. Joseph Acierno, of Omaha, would be succeeding Dr. Joann Schaefer. She is stepping down next month to become a vice president for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska.

The 51-year-old Acierno has been deputy chief medical officer since May 2007. He graduated from Creighton University in Omaha with a bachelor’s and with doctorates in medicine and law.

S.D. Leads Nation In Native American Poverty Rate

BY KRISTI EATON  
Associated Press

SIoux FALLS — South Dakota leads the nation in the percentage of Native Americans living below the poverty line, and more than half of the Native Americans in the state’s second largest city live in poverty, according to new U.S. Census data released Wednesday.

More than 48 percent of the state’s 65,000 Native Americans live below the poverty threshold, according to the American Community Survey on poverty covering 2007 to 2011. In Rapid City, the poverty rate for Native Americans was 50.9 percent. This leads the nation among the 20 cities most populated by American Indians and Alaska Natives.

“The number is unacceptable,” said Rapid City Mayor Sam Kooiker. “And I think the situation is not limited to our Native population, although it affects the Native population more dramatically than other segments of the population.”

Under current federal guidelines, an individual earning less than \$11,170 a year or a family of four with an annual income of less than \$23,050 is considered to be living in poverty.

Kooiker said the Black Hills of South Dakota is an area that has struggled with high underemployment numbers for years. The mayor said the solution is a two-pronged one: increasing opportunities in both the government and private sector, and having potential employees work to improve their skill sets once those opportunities are in place.

For example, Kooiker said, the United Tribes Technical College out of North Dakota will soon be opening a campus in Rapid City to provide education and training opportunities for Native Americans.

Aside from South Dakota, eight other states had poverty rates of about 30 percent or more for American Indians and Alaska Natives. They are Arizona, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota and Utah.

Mike McCurry, the state demographer for South Dakota, said he is not surprised by the numbers because the American Indians in South Dakota have never recovered from the financial collapse and the Dust Bowl in the early 1900s.

“Most of our concentrations of poverty are in the reservations, but they’re also concentrated — Rapid City gets a lot of people leaving the reservation looking for jobs,” he said. “The difference between being in poverty and not being in poverty to a lot of us is one paycheck.”

He said Denver is another city

that many Native Americans from South Dakota’s nine Indian reservations move to in hopes of finding employment. Denver’s poverty rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives is 29.1 percent, according to the census data.

“So when we’re looking at nearly 30 percent of poverty in Denver, that’s probably also reflecting some of the people that aren’t in Rapid (City),” he said.

Wade Two Charge, 30, relocated to Denver and also tried moves to Phoenix, Florida and California with hopes of finding steady unemployment. He’s since returned to his home and family on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in south-central South Dakota.

Two Charge, who has a degree in business administration from the tribal college, said he has been unemployed since getting back to the reservation, except for some short construction stints.

“There are only so many projects going on on the reservation at

a time — so many buildings going down and going up,” he said.

His most recent job, which involved construction of a new tribal jail and lasted about a year, ended last year. Another job he has coming up will only last about two months.

Two Charge, who lives in a trailer on a lot his family owns, doesn’t have a car and relies on social gatherings and \$200 in food stamps for food each month.

“There are avenues to help, but it’s definitely a lot more difficult than other places,” he said of his current surroundings. “In a city, you can just jump in a bus and go across town. The whole society is different and it’s not the ghetto. Here, there are no buses. We rely a lot upon family members to help us out. I think that’s where we’re blessed to have an emphasis on respect for our elders.”

He still thinks about leaving the reservation, but said he doesn’t want to move away from his home

and his people.

Online:  
American Community Survey:  
<http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr11-17.pdf>

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