

THE TENNESSEAN

If South Dakota can expand Medicaid, why can't Tennessee? | Opinion

Nearly 4 in 5 U.S. states have expanded Medicaid and that has yielded health care for the insured, created new jobs and protected rural hospitals.

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On Election Day 2022, voters in South Dakota (a pretty deep red state) voted overwhelmingly to expand Medicaid.

To date, 39 states and the District of Columbia have chosen to expand Medicaid, covering individuals up to 138% of the Federal Poverty Level (that's an income of \$17,774 for an individual – the equivalent of up to \$8.55 per hour - in 2021).

Only Tennessee and ten others states still deny health coverage to their own people. As South Dakotans just did, every time voters in any state have had the choice, they have voted "Yes!" to expand Medicaid coverage to low-wage workers.

And each of those votes should remind our own state legislators that Tennesseans want Medicaid expansion, too.

Unfortunately, unlike those other states, Tennessee's state constitution does not allow voters to gather enough signatures to put an issue on the ballot so that the people can vote on it themselves. Here, the legislature has to approve all laws, including expansion of Medicaid.

Not Expanding Medicaid is 'Tragic'

In 2015, our legislature killed Republican Gov. Bill Haslam's Insure Tennessee plan, which would have expanded Medicaid at no cost to state taxpayers.

In 2016, a task force of conservative legislators led by Rep. Cameron Sexton, R-Crossville (now Speaker of the House), proposed to expand Medicaid over two years, prioritizing coverage for uninsured veterans and people who need mental health care.

Last year Congress offered Tennessee a \$900 million "signing bonus" if the state would expand Medicaid – something Governor Haslam showed would cost the state

nothing. Yet Governor Bill Lee and legislative leaders refuse even to discuss these or any of the other Medicaid expansion proposals submitted each year.

The consequences of that refusal are far-reaching and tragic. In 2014, the Affordable Care Act made federally funded Medicaid available so states could cover uninsured adults in low-wage jobs. Since then, researchers have compared outcomes in the majority of states that expanded Medicaid with the dwindling number, like Tennessee, that have refused.

The evidence is in, and it is overwhelming: Medicaid expansion dramatically improves lives.

How Medicaid Expansion Improves Lives

For people who have ever lived with the anxiety of being uninsured, that's no surprise. As a major study concluded two decades ago, people without insurance "live sicker and die sooner." Health care has only gotten more expensive since then, causing even more uninsured people to go without care or face medical bankruptcy.

A recent synthesis summarized the results of over 400 studies. The studies documented that extending Medicaid to uninsured people improves their access to care. It reduces mortality and improves health and healthy behaviors.

Medicaid coverage also increases families' financial security by protecting them from medical debt and medical conditions that reduce earnings. Medicaid expansion reduces rates of food insecurity, poverty and home evictions.

Medicaid Expansion Also Creates Jobs

When Medicaid expands, the benefits extend beyond the newly insured to everyone in the state. By bringing billions in federal health funds into a state, Medicaid generates thousands of jobs and supports the health care infrastructure on which all residents rely.

Moreover, it's just the right thing to do for our fellow Tennesseans.

One research finding is especially important for rural Tennesseans. Tennessee already has the highest rate of rural hospital closings of any state, and a third of remaining rural hospitals are at risk of bankruptcy. (Federal COVID payments have temporarily sustained rural hospitals, but when the pandemic ends, closures will likely resume.)

The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office has reported that Medicaid expansion makes it six times more likely that a rural hospital will be financially able to continue serving its community.

The loss of a rural hospital devastates a community – not only by limiting local healthcare, but by making it so much harder to recruit employers and industry to a local area. Over time, this also impacts job growth.

Tennesseans may not know these details, but most of us have enough common sense – and enough concern for ourselves and our neighbors – that polling shows overwhelming support for Medicaid expansion.

South Dakota voters' decision to expand Medicaid should remind Tennessee legislators to heed the will of their own constituents. Lives are at stake.

And it's the humanitarian thing to do.

Dr. Michael Burcham is a healthcare practitioner, leader, educator, strategist and investor.