

Governor Rick Scott: We Must Protect the Uninsured and Florida Taxpayers with Limited Medicaid Expansion

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A few months ago, my mother passed away, and I lost one of the only constants in my life.

Losing someone so close to you puts everything in a new perspective...especially the big decisions.

When I decided to run for Governor in 2010, it was the first time I ever ran for anything.

I was a businessman and not a politician. But, I worried for my children and my grandchildren because our state, and our country, was headed in the wrong direction.

I knew from my own experience, and my Mom's example, that no government program or government spending could substitute for the hard work and sacrifice that make dreams come true in this country.

Before I ever dreamed of standing here today as Governor of this great state, I was a strong advocate for better ways to improve healthcare than the government-run approach taken in the President's healthcare law.

I believe in a different approach. But, regardless of what I – or anyone else - believes, a Supreme Court decision and a presidential election made the President's healthcare mandates the law of the land.

I still worry that the government-run approach in the president's law could lead to less patient choice, worse care, and higher costs.

I want every Floridian who wants a job to find one, and I want every Floridian to have access to quality healthcare they can afford.

We achieved some progress toward this healthcare goal when the federal government finally granted two waivers for the state to tailor its current Medicaid program to better fit the needs of the people it serves. I want to especially thank the legislature for the major role they played in achieving these big wins for our state.

There are two policy decisions facing us today in Medicaid. One – is the question of the state running an exchange for people to buy insurance, and the second is whether or not we will expand those eligible for healthcare through Medicaid.

Because of the many unknowns that still surround the operation of an exchange, we will not commit Florida to running an insurance exchange.

On the question of Medicaid expansion, there are no perfect options.

To be clear - our options are either having Floridians pay to fund this program in other states while denying healthcare to our citizens – or – using federal funding to help some of the poorest in our state with the Medicaid program as we explore other healthcare reforms.

As I wrestled with this decision, I thought about my Mom's struggles raising five kids with very little money.

I remember my Mom's heartbreak when she could not afford to give my younger brother the treatment he needed when we learned he had a hip disease.

She eventually found him a Shriner's Children's Hospital hundreds of miles away...where my brother would go back and forth for treatment.

My Mom was a proud, strong woman who wanted to make it on her own without help. But how would she have felt if she knew she was denied help that she was already paying for?

It was my Mom – the wife of a WWII veteran - who taught me something I still believe today: this country is the greatest in the world. America's greatness is largely because of how we value the weakest among us.

Quality healthcare services must be accessible and affordable for all – not just those in certain zip codes or tax brackets.

No mother, or father, should despair over whether or not they can afford – or access – the healthcare their child needs.

While the federal government is committed to paying 100 percent of the cost of new people in Medicaid, I cannot, in good conscience, deny the uninsured access to care.

We will support a three-year expansion of our Medicaid program under the new healthcare law, as long as the federal government meets their commitment to pay 100 percent of the cost during this time.

Legislation we would support would sunset after three years and need to be reauthorized.

It would also sunset if the federal government backed away from their 100 percent commitment during this period.

I have talked to legislative leaders and asked them to share in our commitment to protecting the uninsured and Florida taxpayers with this three-year authorization.

This careful approach has important advantages for both those in need of healthcare and the taxpayers who finance our Medicaid program.

First – the federal government committed to pay 100 percent of the Medicaid expansion for the first three years.

Second – three years is a reasonable period to judge just how well the expansion is working and to explore further reforms to improve cost, quality and access in healthcare – both in the public and private markets.

Third – this time allows us to evaluate the federal government's ability to meet their financial commitments to Florida and every state now facing a Medicaid expansion.

Fourth and finally – a sunset guarantees a meaningful reassessment when we have more facts about how expansion will impact cost, quality and access to care. It also avoids saddling taxpayers with a government-style, open-ended spending commitment that rolls on forever with no real review.

I want to be clear that we will not simply deny new Medicaid recipients health insurance three years from now. I am committed to protecting care for these Floridians, just as I am committed to protecting Florida taxpayers by evaluating the expansion over the next three years with the help of the state's health agency and legislative committees.

We will spend the next three years measuring how the expansion impacts healthcare cost, quality and access for Florida families. We will evaluate whether services are best provided through the Medicaid program, if the program needs more flexibility, or if some services are better provided in the private market.

The federal health department has committed to working with us to ensure we have all the flexibilities we need to make Medicaid best meet the needs of Floridians.

In closing, I want to talk directly to the people of Florida:

My top priority continues to be making our state a global leader in job creation.

Getting a great job is still the best way to access great healthcare. But, we must also be sensitive to the needs of the poorest and the weakest among us who struggle to access affordable, high-quality care.

I don't want any parent to worry, like my Mom did, that they might not be able to help their sick child.

Expanding access to Medicaid services for three years is a compassionate, common sense step forward.

It is not the end of our work to improve healthcare.

And, it is not a white flag of surrender to government-run healthcare.

I am committed to working every day to improve access to affordable, high-quality healthcare in Florida, while also protecting taxpayers and keeping our economy growing to create more jobs – which ultimately fuels the dreams of every Florida family.