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Medicaid at risk in debt limit fight

Published: August 4, 2011

Medicaid remains at risk during debt limit battle

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By Sheila Reed

The deficit debate in Washington, D.C., is threatening the sustainability of one of our great national legacies — the Medicaid program of public health insurance. Medicaid provides long-term care to millions of seniors, helps Americans with disabilities live independently in their communities, and ensures children can see a doctor when they get sick. It also responds automatically in a weak economy, helping vulnerable Americans weather tough economic times.

Right now in Congress, proposals to block grant, cut or cap Medicaid are being considered on both sides of the aisle. President Obama has proposed a \$100 billion cut over the next 12 years. The Republicans want to cut even more. Medicaid is one of the bargaining chips, along with Social Security and Medicare, in the current stalemate over raising the debt ceiling — a battle that threatens to derail many decades of social progress. And, because Social Security and Medicare benefit from stronger political support than Medicaid, it is the Medicaid program that is most in danger.

Vermont has a proud history of commitment to making sure that our poorest and most vulnerable citizens receive comprehensive health insurance coverage. In addition to full use of coverage opportunities under the Medicaid program, we are justifiably proud of being the first state to pass a law designed to create a single-payer health insurance system. Significant cuts or structural changes to the Medicaid program will delay our movement toward full coverage of all Vermont's citizens.

The Medicaid program covers thousands of Vermont children and pregnant women, as well as low-income, elderly and disabled adults. Not only has our state made coverage of young children a high priority; we took the option to cover low-income young adults up to the age of 21. As a result, according to 2009 figures, only 2.8 percent of Vermont children under age 18 lack health insurance, one of the lowest uninsured rates in the nation for children. The Dr. Dynasaur program is a model that ensures that children up to 300 percent of the federal poverty line are covered for screening, diagnosis and treatment.

The recent study out of Oregon demonstrating that Medicaid coverage keeps adults healthier, both psychologically and physically, makes the proposed cuts or structural changes even more ironic.

The Oregon study compared uninsured adults with those receiving coverage under Medicaid. The results demonstrated that those receiving Medicaid sought preventive care and treatment more than the uninsured. They were much more likely to have a particular clinic or office for medical care and to have a primary doctor. The insured felt better and were spared the terrible financial stressors around unpaid medical bills. The study soundly puts to rest arguments, currently swirling around Washington, that Medicaid recipients would be better off uninsured.

Vermonters count on our federal delegation to vote against draconian cuts to the social programs that provide basic protections to our vulnerable citizens. We know that Sens. Leahy and Sanders and Congressman Welch will do their best to protect Medicaid.

However, we cannot be complacent. The Medicaid program has become a pawn in the debt ceiling debate and our lawmakers may be faced with the choice to vote for cuts or structural changes to Medicaid in order to raise the debt ceiling. Such a choice is no choice at all; it will harm the health of Vermonters and all Americans who rely on Medicaid for health care coverage. We must demand that Congress protect this invaluable program and make it even stronger.

Sheila Reed is associate director of Voices for Vermont's Children.

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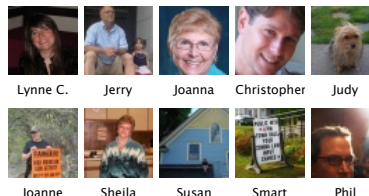
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