

Mississippi interfaith leaders urge health care access

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Interfaith leaders hand-delivered letters to Mississippi legislators Wednesday urging them to look again at supporting the expansion of health care access to 300,000 Mississippians.

The Mississippi legislature balked at Medicaid expansion this year in a state ranking last for health care performance, with 13% of its residents lacking health insurance.

Working Together Mississippi — an organization building a constituency for increasing health care access through Medicaid with Affordable Care Act funding — is looking to reverse those trends.

The organization is backing an option to expand health care access for Mississippians where 90% of funding would come from the federal government, and the remaining 10% required match would be funded by a self-tax paid by hospitals. They want the support for this plan from the state legislature.

“When you look at what happened when Medicaid was not expanded, the amount of hurt and pain, suffering, that occurred across Mississippi is not just a health issue that’s a moral issue,” Bishop Ronnie Crudup, of New Horizon Church International, said Wednesday, standing in the Capitol rotunda.

The timing is paramount as the pandemic has added an additional layer, leaving thousands of other Mississippians unemployed — disproportionately affecting minorities and working poor. As a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill passed in Congress on Wednesday, and is headed to President Joe Biden to



Bishop Ronnie Crudup, front center, waits to address faith leaders and Working Together Mississippi members at the first-floor Capitol rotunda. The over 300 interfaith signatures on the letters they delivered took around two months to collect. (Photo: Sarah Haselhorst/Clarion Ledger)

sign, Mississippians spearheading efforts of Medicaid expansion see this as an apt time to act.

Legislation within the relief bill would “provide Mississippi with \$600 million over the next two years,” Crudup said.

An estimated 19,000 new jobs would also follow. And if leadership does not act soon, he said, “they are not only performing the grave injustice” to both uninsured Mississippians and rural hospitals on the brink of closure.

The letter “implores them (legislators) to discard this nonsensical, hyperpartisan gridlock and political grandstanding, and to, instead do what is so obviously in the best interests of Mississippians,” a Wednesday statement from Crudup read.

What Working Together Mississippi wants

Over 300 signatures of interfaith clergy leaders in Mississippi are attached to the letter. This is the change they’re seeking:

- h Affordable health care available to Mississippi adults earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level.

- h Increase Medicaid benefits for postpartum mothers from 60 days to six months.

- h Help sustain hospitals, especially in rural areas.

- h Reduce uncompensated care of hospital, which is highly prevalent in rural areas.

- h Allow the state time, while working with community partners, to develop a way to sustain this level of health care for uninsured residents.

A deeper look

In 2010, the Affordable Care Act allowed the expansion of Medicaid coverage beyond people with disabilities, poor children, pregnant women and low-income seniors.

It widened its reach to include low-income adults. Eligibility for Medicaid based on the Affordable Care Act includes all low-income people making at or below 138% of the federal poverty line, or \$17,609 a person. Under those standards, around 179,000 Mississippians would be covered.

Medicaid coverage in Mississippi leaves a significant chunk of low-income Mississippians in limbo. They make too much money for the state’s Medicaid

insurance coverage but not enough for marketplace health insurance plans through the Affordable Care Act.

Mississippi legislators turned down the nearly \$1 billion in federal funding that would come with Medicaid expansion, citing the program's estimated price tag of \$75 to 100 million that would fall to the state.

It's a cost too high, Mississippi legislators have said.

A possible remedy

The organization points to a plan formed by the Mississippi Hospital Association to alleviate the burden of health care costs to the state.

For Mississippi adults earning up to the 138% of the federal poverty line, the Mississippi Cares plan would offer each participant the same benefits and the same co-pay rates as those with Medicaid.

Though, the association's plan stipulates unemployed participants would need to enroll in either job training or an education program.

The federal government would fund 90% of the plan, and the matching 10% would be fronted by a \$20 monthly premium per participant as well as Mississippi hospital contributions.

No funding from the state would be required under the association's proposal.

In 2019, the Hospital Association identified the Mississippi Cares plan could generate jobs and \$200 million more state revenue per year, according to Clarion Ledger reporting.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services would need to approve the plan.