

Obamacare is here to stay - even in Idaho

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The moment a 6-3 U.S. Supreme Court ruling removed all doubt that Obamacare was here to stay, it became inevitable that Idaho would extend Medicaid coverage to working poor adults.

Because of that ruling, the last threat to Obamacare's core premise has been removed: One way or another, Americans will get health insurance coverage - through private carriers, subsidies offered through exchanges or from government programs such as Medicare, Veterans Administration or Medicaid.

Idaho's state-based exchange, YourHealth Idaho, extends coverage to more than 84,000 Idahoans.

But the state continues to drag its feet about helping the 78,000 Idaho adults who make too little to qualify for the subsidies.

How long will that continue? Here's a bet: Until the day Idaho lawmakers look at the map and see themselves as the last holdout.

It's happened before. When Medicaid itself was created, only half the states - Idaho included - signed up in 1966. By the end of the decade, two states still refused to go along - Alaska, which accepted Medicaid in 1972, and Arizona, where resistance ended in 1982.

So far, 30 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to extend Medicaid under Obamacare. Montana was the latest. Utah and Alaska are still in flux. And the debate continues in Missouri, Tennessee, Virginia and Wyoming.

That's because it makes sense.

Obamacare calls for the federal government to pay 100 percent of Medicaid's expansion for the first three years but never less than 90 percent thereafter.

Idaho has even more incentive since it already spends an estimated \$52 million at the county and state level on the medical bills of people deemed unable to make those payments.

Expand Medicaid and that money can go elsewhere - into schools or back to the taxpayers.

Because Congress anticipated Medicaid paying more costs, the federal government is cutting back on what it provided hospitals for unpaid bills. Without Medicaid expansion, Idaho hospitals stand to lose about \$1.5 billion during the next 10 years.

What the government no longer provides, ordinary patients will.

Offer someone Medicaid and you provide him with ongoing treatments for chronic conditions - diabetes, high-blood pressure and arthritis, for instance.

Idaho's medically indigent program focuses on crisis care. More often than not, once a person is stabilized, he's left to his own devices.

So every year Idaho waits to approve Medicaid expansion, 450 people won't get the treatment that otherwise would have spared their lives.

Were it left to Idaho voters, the matter would be settled by now. They are not as hard-hearted as their elected representatives.

You saw it this summer when the public browbeat the GOP into complying with a federal measure required to permit child support collection enforcement to move forward.

You've seen it across the state as communities step in and adopt civil rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity because state lawmakers refuse to act.

But Idaho Republicans are caught in the throes of Obama Derangement Syndrome, and nothing - not logic, not money and not compassion - is going to move them.

Until Obama is an ex-president.

That's coming up in 18 months.

Then, perhaps, Idaho companies and health care providers who are being squeezed by this policy can break through political inertia and persuade Idaho lawmakers to change their minds.

That day is coming.

But how many lives and how much money will be lost in the process?

- M.T.