

If not Obamacare and Ottercare, then what?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It's now clear what the Idaho Legislature is unwilling to do.

It's unwilling to extend Medicaid coverage to 78,000 working poor adults.

Year after year, it has refused to act - even when confronted with the stark reality that it has condemned as many as 800 people a year to premature deaths by denying them access to preventive health care. Among them was Jenny Steinke of Idaho Falls, who died of complications from untreated asthma.

It has refused to act even as 31 states - including Washington and Oregon - and the District of Columbia have extended Medicaid coverage.

It has turned a deaf ear to the finances. Under Obamacare, the federal government would cover 100 percent of expansion's costs during the first three years, but never less than 90 percent thereafter. Considering the \$38 million Idaho now spends each year on medical bills incurred by indigents, Medicaid expansion would save the state money.

But at least, lawmakers would be willing to do something.

Wouldn't they?

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and Health and Welfare Director Richard Armstrong hoped so.

They offered a modest \$30 million package - the Primary Care Access Program, otherwise dubbed "Ottercare."

It was always more of a gesture than a solution.

For instance, the money wasn't necessarily buying new care as much as reimbursing the primary care clinics that already help the poor and uninsured.

"My worry with PCAP is that it helps me do what I do, but it stops at my walls," says Heidi Traylor, who is the CEO of Terry Reilly Health Care Centers.

None of the \$30 million would buy prescriptions, treatment for chronic illnesses and hospitalization. Those costs remain on the backs of the taxpayers, health care providers and other patients who are bearing them today.

Idahoans would pay more through PCAP and indigent care and still get far less than they would through Medicaid expansion.

Many Democrats thought it a bad bargain and many refused to go along.

Republicans, too, got heartburn with Armstrong's initial plan to pay for PCAP by hiking Idaho's low 57-cent-per-pack cigarette tax by about \$1.50.

So he came up with a PCAP funding package that transferred money out of dedicated funds - including a sizeable portion from the tobacco lawsuit settlement that had been flowing into Idaho's Millennium Fund.

That turned out to be a rickety frame. Monday, a majority of House State Affairs Committee members - including Reps. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton, and Paulette Jordan, D-Plummer - turned thumbs down on taking money from the dedicated accounts.

And that, as they say, is that.

Burley Republican Fred Wood, the House Health and Welfare Committee chairman and retired physician who last fall said PCAP was "an excellent first step," deemed the measure DOA.

"We needed to know where the support was and where the support wasn't, and now we know," Wood said. "Everybody wonders why we don't do Medicaid expansion. Well, there's no support for Medicaid expansion, and there doesn't seem to be much support at all for the PCAP program."

Later, Wood told the legislative budget-writing committee that what is happening to the uninsured population "is just unfair and wrong. It's as simple as that."

As "unfair and wrong" as it may be, a majority of Wood's colleagues seem willing to leave things just as they are - and sleep soundly at night. - M.T.