

# With pressure off, Idaho can ignore poor and sick

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**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

So that's it? Just walk away?

The fate of 78,000 low-income Idahoans is sealed?

There will be no Medicaid expansion next year?

Maybe not even the year after?

This was going to be the longest of long shots. Idaho's Republican-led Legislature was going to be dragged kicking and screaming into implementing the Obamacare reform that offered health care insurance to the working poor - even if the feds were covering virtually all of the costs.

Then came the election.

Next January, Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, and Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, won't be at the Statehouse, appealing to their colleagues' collective conscience to do something.

Both physician-legislators were defeated.

Meanwhile, President-elect Donald Trump and a Republican majority in Congress have the opportunity to "repeal and replace" Obamacare.

"I think that takes the pressure off the Legislature," House Majority Caucus Chairman John Vander Woude told the Tribune's William L. Spence.

Well, the pressure may be off the Legislature.

But this much has not changed: The decision of lawmakers in Idaho and 18 other states to hold off expanding Medicaid coverage has been a death sentence for the working poor.

Give people ongoing care for diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and mental illness and fewer of them die prematurely. As Idaho Falls physician Ken Krell wrote in the Post Register earlier this year, a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2012 figured such coverage prevented 19.6 deaths per 100,000 adults.

That would translate to 321 Idahoans each year.

And as more low-income adults get regular checkups and treatment, their health improves. So by the time the research team updated its findings for a upcoming American Journal of Health Economics, it found the death rate had dropped by 22.5 per 100,000 adults.

In Idaho, that would mean 368 more people surviving.

Here's something else you can count on: You'll pay for it.

Regardless of what's in his bank account, nobody gets turned away from an Idaho hospital emergency room. If he can't pay, eventually Idaho's counties and the state Catastrophic Health Care accounts will pick up the tab.

By enabling people to sign up for subsidized private health insurance, Obama-

care already eased the pressure off the state's medically indigent program. What once cost \$55 million four years ago has dropped to \$34 million. Caseloads are about half what they were in 2013.

But the savings have been squeezed out of the system. About the only people still clinging to this safety net are the 78,000 members of the so-called "gap" population.

The claims they're making on the system are rising. Counties already have reported a 12 percent jump in what they're spending on mental health-related cases alone.

And for what?

Does anybody seriously think "repealing and replacing" Obamacare means throwing 20 million people - half of whom are recipients of expanded Medicaid services in 30 states - to the street? Not without the bloodiest political fight you've ever seen.

So if Trump and the GOP Congress retain coverage for those 20 million, Medicaid is going to enter into the mix.

They have few choices. Medicaid is cheaper than private insurance. And its managers know how to keep a lid on the cost of treating people who are sicker and more disabled than the population as a whole.

Getting to that point, however, could take a couple of years - if the GOP Congress sticks to the Obamacare repeal schedule it set out in the reconciliation bill it passed and President Obama vetoed in 2015.

At that point, Idaho will be back to where it started - facing an imperative to expand Medicaid.

Until then, hundreds of Idahoans will die prematurely and millions in Idaho tax dollars will go up in smoke.

But, at least the political pressure is off. - M.T.