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Put Medicaid expansion on front burner

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That showdown in Austin over Medicaid expansion — well, dueling press events anyway on Monday — likely changed few minds. We are nonetheless thankful for the effort. Arguing such an important issue openly and loudly serves to keep it where it belongs: on the front burner and in the public eye.

Front burner, by the way, means acting expediently. State Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, suggested on Tuesday, delaying addressing the issue to see how federal health reform works, though he would create an interim funding mechanism for low-income Texas to secure private insurance.

This has merit. But expansion has more.

On Monday, Gov. Rick Perry mobilized an impressive array of state GOP heavyweights, U.S. Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz among them, to oppose expansion.

Among those on the other side were Joaquín and Julián Castro, congressman and San Antonio mayor, respectively; Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff and Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins.

At least three of those arguing for Medicaid expansion are in local government, closer to the ground where the expansion would do the most good, noting the costs the uninsured impose on the insured and on local hospital emergency rooms.

Perry argues that Medicaid expansion would consume a third of the state budget. To validate this claim, his office sent a 2010 report by the Cato Institute for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. But the projections are challenged by others and are hard to figure in any case, since the deal the feds offer as part of the Affordable Care Act has Texas paying nothing for the first three years of expansion and the state share is capped at 10 percent thereafter. There is apparently an assumption that the feds will break their promise.

Medicaid expenditures have indeed skyrocketed nationally and will rise in the future, as the governor's office claims. But this cannot be separated from need. Texas has an abundance. The state has 6.1 million people (about 1.2 million of whom are children) — nearly a quarter of all Texans — who are uninsured. Medicaid expansion would cover adults at 133 percent of the federal poverty level.

Let's look at who is now uninsured. Broken down by race and ethnicity, 14 percent of whites in Texas are uninsured, 23 percent of blacks and 23 percent of Asians. These numbers are high for each group but note that more than one in three — 36 percent — of Texas Latinos are uninsured. Of the 6.1 million uninsured in Texas, one third of them are U.S. citizen Latinos, according to the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which also cites

estimates that between 1.6 million and 1.8 million of uninsured Texans would be eligible for coverage under Medicaid expansion.

Expand Medicaid.