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Kansas House Committee Tables Medicaid Expansion

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February 20, 2017

Topeka, Kan. (AP) -- Kansas lawmakers tabled a bill Monday that would expand Medicaid, which could mean the bill is dead until next year.

The House Health and Human Services Committee delayed a vote until April 3, after a deadline for bills to pass their chamber of origin.

The expansion would have given health care coverage through KanCare, the state's privatized Medicaid program, to between 100,000 and 200,000 adults who fall into a gap between the existing Medicaid program and subsidized insurance through the Affordable Care Act Marketplace, according to various estimates.

The expansion extends coverage to adults earning up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level, about \$16,000 for a single person.

Sheldon Weisgrau, director of the Health Reform Research Project, called the move a "cop out" and said tabling it meant lawmakers avoided going "on the record as being opposed to Medicaid expansion."

Republican Committee Chair Daniel Hawkins, an opponent of expansion, said the bill was effectively dead. But Republican Vice Chair Susan Concannon said she would ask House Speaker Ron Ryckman, Jr. to exempt the measure from deadlines.

The vote comes as Congressional Republicans mull reforms to the Affordable Care Act that could phase out the expanded Medicaid coverage that had been completely funded and would still be almost entirely federally funded. Thirty-one states, not including Kansas, expanded Medicaid coverage.

The measure also comes after federal officials in the Obama administration threatened financial sanctions against the state, saying KanCare is "substantively out of compliance" with federal law and regulations by not adequately overseeing the companies it hires to run the program.

Expansion measure was backed by businesses, providers and patients, who say it would attract more federal funds and increase access to care. The federal government would pay 94 percent of the cost now, and the rate drops down to 90 percent by 2020.

Weisgrau said the insured population brought by expansion could financially help providers who have been paid less by KanCare for patient services recently because the state made a cut to the program to help balance a troubled budget.

Via Christi Health CEO Michael Mullins told the committee this month that his group has cut 650 jobs since 2013 because of Medicare and KanCare cuts that expansion would offset.

Opponents said it would be costly.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, argued that Kansas taxpayers are currently helping fund other states' expansions, but the federal government doesn't have any more money to give without borrowing.

"If the federal government is going to spend more money, where is it going to get that money?" he said.

Melissa Fausz, a senior policy analyst at the conservative Americans For Prosperity, said there's no "pot of Kansas money" in the federal budget.

Opponents said other expansion states have seen more signups than they projected because people who were already eligible for the existing programs signed up in the wake of expansion. States pay a larger share of the cost for those participants, so opponents say those additional signups could be costly. The nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation said states still saw positive economic impacts.

Those who want to expand KanCare say it will allow the state to take advantage of more federal funding, but changes being considered in Congress could give less money for added Medicaid patients than expanded states have been getting. However, extra Medicaid money could flow into all states .

If Ryckman exempts the bill from deadlines, the committee could vote in April. His spokesman Eric Turek said in a text message that he would release a statement Tuesday.