

Medicaid expansion skeptics warn Kansas lawmakers not to take plunge

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Gregg Pfister, a Missouri-based representative of the Foundation for Government Accountability was among those who testified in opposition to legislation Tuesday that would expand Medicaid eligibility in the state. (Thad Allton/The Capital-Journal)

Sen. Ty Masterson, R-Andover, left, a member of the Senate Public Health and Welfare committee, asked a question during a hearing before the committee for those in opposition to legislation that would expand Medicaid eligibility in the state. (Thad Allton/The Capital-Journal)

Two out-of-state think tanks denounced legislation Tuesday expanding Medicaid eligibility to as many as 150,000 low-income Kansans under provisions of the Affordable Care Act by pointing to long-term costs to state government and flawed logic of directing health services to able-bodied adults.

The Cato Institute and the Foundation for Government Accountability were lone opponents of House Bill 2044 adopted by the House and under scrutiny by the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee. Gov. Sam Brownback has consistently fought a movement in Kansas to broaden the reach of KanCare, the state's Medicaid program, under so-called Obamacare.

"Kansas should exercise extreme caution before expanding its Medicaid program," said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., who testified to the Senate committee on behalf of the Kansas Policy Institute. "Medicaid expansion ... is a risky gamble that is almost certain to cost more than you are currently budgeting, while providing surprisingly little to the poor in terms of improved access to health care."

Tanner said the seven-year cost of expansion could reach \$730 million and could require a substantial tax increase to finance the law. Under existing federal statute, the U.S. government would cover 94 percent of expansion costs in 2018, 93 percent in 2019 and 90 percent in 2020 and thereafter.

Gregg Pfister, a Missouri-based representative of the Foundation for Government Accountability, said Kansas wisely resisted the temptation to follow 31 states that inflated Medicaid rolls in response to the financially unsustainable ACA.

“You now have the benefit of seeing this disaster with 20/20 vision,” he said. “Medicaid expansion prioritizes able-bodied adults over the state’s most vulnerable citizens. Its costs are uncontrollable. It will eliminate your budget flexibility and crowd out priorities.”

Kansas has about 425,000 people enrolled in Medicaid. The state limits these services to individuals with physical or developmental disabilities, seniors unable to pay for nursing home care as well as pregnant women and children in low-income families.

Supporters of Medicaid expansion testified Monday in support of the House-passed bill to improve access of individuals to preventative health care and to strengthen the financial standing of hospitals in the state. Advocates of the bill said failure to expand Medicaid in Kansas had prevented infusion of \$1.7 billion into the state’s health care system and the state’s struggling economy.

Brownback and Republican legislators blocked action in the Legislature on expansion of health care for the past three years.

In a statement after the House voted 81-44 for the expansion bill, the governor issued a statement urging senators not to tie the state to a “failed program of the past just before its inevitable demise” at the hands of the U.S. Congress and President Donald Trump.