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Groups working to protect and expand Medicaid, healthcare coverage

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Brian Whitlock, president and CEO of the Idaho Hospital Association and a member of the statewide coalition Close the Gap, speaks during a press conference about the importance of Medicaid on Monday. He is pictured with Sandra Abend, back left, Debra Parsons, Robert Deidrich, Kevin Swearingen, front left, and Erick Yeary.

By Kendra Evensen, kevensen@journalnet.com

IDAHO FALLS — Close the Gap, the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities and others are working together to show elected officials why it's important for Idahoans to have access to Medicaid and affordable healthcare coverage.

They hope their efforts will help protect and expand Medicaid opportunities in the state.

“During a time of repeated Congressional attempts to fundamentally alter and reduce the role of Medicaid, current recipients of Idaho's Medicaid program, as well as those seeking to expand the program's reach in Idaho, have come together to make the case for protecting Medicaid from caps, block grants and budget cuts, and to expand Idaho's Medicaid program through new waiver options,” according to a news release.

As part of their efforts, they're collecting and sharing the personal stories of Idahoans who have benefited from Medicaid and those who've struggled to get affordable healthcare because they fall into the coverage gap.

Their storybook, “Why Healthcare Matters: Stories from Idahoans” already contains 24 personal stories about children and adults and officials say they're planning to add more.

During a news conference on Monday, Shelley resident Kevin Swearingen shared his story.

“I have a disability. It's cerebral palsy. It's where your muscles don't work very well, so I have to have therapy. Without therapy, my muscles would basically shrivel up and I would basically be in a ball. I wouldn't be able to live,” he said.

Swearingen, who gets around in a powered wheelchair, said Medicaid plays a huge role in his life, giving him access to important services that help him function everyday and make it possible for him to do some of the things he loves, like ride a horse.

During the press conference on Monday, Debra Parsons, who chairs the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities, also discussed how Medicaid helped three autistic children she adopted and raised.

“Because they had Medicaid coverage, they were able to access just about every program they could ever need,” she said, adding that they received speech and physical therapy and had help in their classrooms. “They graduated from high school. Everybody said they would never speak, let alone go to school and be able to function.”

Today, all three are productive adults, working in jobs and paying taxes, she said.

“It's the ultimate success story and everybody deserves that. Everyone in Idaho deserves to have that level of success in their lives,” she said.

While Close the Gap and the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities are sharing the personal stories of Idahoans who have benefited from Medicaid assistance, they're also working to expand healthcare coverage for others who need help.

Brian Whitlock, president and CEO of the Idaho Hospital Association and a member of the statewide coalition Close the Gap, believes the Idaho Health Care Plan would be beneficial. He said the proposal, which is being developed by the government-appointed Health Care Advisory Panel, includes two waivers.

“The Idaho Department of Insurance and Your Health Idaho state insurance marketplace have developed a waiver concept plan that would allow low-income Idahoans in the coverage gap to qualify for advanced premium tax credits to purchase coverage in Idaho’s marketplace,” according to information provided to the Journal during the press conference.

Whitlock noted that roughly 35,000 people in the coverage gap – those who aren’t eligible for Medicaid or assistance through the insurance marketplace – could gain access to more affordable healthcare coverage through that waiver.

In addition, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has developed a waiver that would allow more Idahoans who have a high-cost and medically complex health condition to qualify for Medicaid. That change could help between 1,500 and 2,000 people and lower overall premiums for all Idahoans on the health insurance exchange by an average of 20 percent, according to the information provided to the Journal.

“This dual waiver program is an opportunity to help stabilize the exchange, lower the premiums Idahoans pay for their health insurance, and open the way for about 35,000 Idahoans to actually access healthcare coverage in the future,” Whitlock said. “We’re very excited and supportive of the Idaho Health Care Plan.”

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