

Gardiner: Senate plan offers Fla. solution to health needs

By **Andy Gardiner**
Guest columnist

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Some say Florida should not expand the existing Medicaid program. I agree.

As a vice president of community relations for a regional hospital system, I understand firsthand the significant health-care challenges facing my community. As a former director of a local chamber of commerce, I learned about the impact of health care on businesses and our economy. As the president of the Florida Senate, I have the opportunity to do something about it.

Florida's constitution contemplates a citizen legislature with the expectation that the best solutions are derived outside of Washington and Tallahassee — that is the type of common-sense solution the Senate put forward.

In communities across our state, people with unmet needs for primary and preventive health care become sick and turn to hospital emergency rooms. Hospitals, unlike other businesses, are required to provide services regardless of a patient's ability to pay.

In 2006, our state launched comprehensive Medicaid reform under the administrations of Gov. Bush and President Bush. To ease the transition to managed care, Florida received permission to create the Low Income Pool. The pool uses local tax dollars to draw federal matching funds for supplemental payments to community and safety-net hospitals serving Medicaid patients and the uninsured.

From the earliest days of the LIP, the federal government expressed its preference for expanded health-insurance coverage. Coverage creates the opportunity for health maintenance, federal officials insisted, and is a better long-term investment for federal taxpayers than continuing a convoluted system of back-end supplemental payments. I agree.

The Florida Health Insurance Affordability Exchange Program developed by the Florida Senate is a consumer-driven approach providing access to high-quality, affordable health coverage to low-income, uninsured Floridians. The program could cover 800,000 Floridians earning less than 138 percent of the poverty level who are not currently eligible under the Medicaid program.

Enrollees will receive a premium credit to shop for plans, services, and products on the FHIX marketplace. With some exceptions, participants are required to work or go to school, and to pay a small amount for premiums, office visits, and prescriptions.

Our state economist projected the program would become an economic generator for the state, creating tens of thousands of jobs and saving state costs. Over time, FHIX will lessen the need for supplemental payments to hospitals, decreasing Florida's current reliance on LIP.

Some suggest traditional Medicaid is a failed program with poor outcomes. I agree.

Republicans, led by Gov. Bush, reformed Medicaid to focus on accountability and performance. The FHIX is not a

reversion to traditional Medicaid or a simple Medicaid expansion as contemplated by the Affordable Care Act. FHIX is the next step toward true Medicaid reform, using the same conservative principles Republicans have advocated for more than a decade.

Some suggest Washington can be an unreliable partner. I agree.

However, just like all other federal money Florida receives, totaling over one-third of our budget, health-care funding comes with strings attached. To address this concern and protect taxpayers from another federal entitlement program, FHIX contracts will end if Washington fails to meet its financial commitments to Florida.

Some suggest the Obama administration will never approve FHIX.

If we simply reject the Washington model and never pass a Florida solution, the federal government will certainly have no reason to consider alternatives to the Medicaid expansion contemplated by Obamacare. However, if the Senate, House and Gov. Scott work together to present Florida's best offer for coverage expansion, we can put our state in the best posture to negotiate free-market guardrails that emphasize personal responsibility and control the future cost and growth of the Medicaid program for Florida's taxpayers.

The Senate plan is included in the upcoming special session along with several health-care initiatives from the House. Compromise is important, and while we stand ready to listen to different perspectives, I believe a comprehensive solution to the serious health-care challenges facing our state must include a Florida solution to coverage for the uninsured.

Florida Senate President Andy Gardiner is a Republican who represents District 13, which includes parts of Brevard and Orange counties.

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