



Serving Southwestern Illinois and the St. Louis region

Illinois Senate, House vote to slash Medicaid

From staff and wire reports

Posted: 5:53pm on May 24, 2012; Modified: 7:54pm on May 24, 2012

Hundreds of thousands of people would see their health care cut back or even eliminated under legislation approved Thursday by the Illinois House and Senate in a desperate attempt to repair the state's crumbling budget.

The Medicaid cuts include ending a prescription drug program for senior citizens, halting two programs that provide health insurance for about 35,000 people, and restricting access to services from heart bypass operations to wheelchair repairs.

Opponents said the cuts will mean suffering and death for some of the 2.7 million people who get care under Medicaid.

"I'm begging you, representative, for the life of the people who are going to die. I'm begging you," Rep. Mary Flowers, D-Chicago, said to the measure's sponsor.

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, said the Medicaid program will fall apart without fast action. Helping the state's poor in the long run requires cutting back now, she said.

"I know it seems ironic, but this is the only way we can accomplish that," Feigenholtz said.

Rep. Dwight Kay, R-Glen Carbon, said during discussion of the bill that Illinois will be "penniless" if it doesn't reform Medicaid.

"If we don't do anything, we will be out of business," Kay said. "We are standing in a bread line...asking for toast, and we can't afford the toast."

Rep. John Cavaletto, R-Salem, said legislators had to make some painful cuts.

"In order to keep our state running and in order to make sure Medicaid is in place for residents in the future, we had to make some hard decisions. It's no secret that we've got a major financial crisis in Illinois and in order to properly address that crisis we had to seriously look at Medicaid reform," Cavaletto said.

The measure passed 94-22 in the House and 44-13 in the Senate. It now goes to Gov. Pat Quinn.

It's part of a package meant to fill a Medicaid shortfall of \$2.7 billion, or nearly \$1 in every \$5 the program spends.

Service cuts would save about \$1.3 billion. Payments to hospitals, nursing homes and other Medicaid providers would be trimmed by an additional \$240 million. In a separate bill, lawmakers will consider more than doubling the state cigarette tax to bring in more money.

Republican opposition has left the outcome of the tax vote in doubt.

But House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, said Thursday evening that the depth of Medicaid cuts had convinced some of his colleagues to agree to the cigarette tax increase. "I think you'll see a complete package pass," Cross said.

Sen. Dale Righter, a leader on Medicaid issues for Senate Republicans, said he doubted any of his GOP colleagues would support the tax increase. If the tax doesn't pass, Democrats would be forced to return to the bargaining table to consider more spending cuts, he said.

The package addresses one of the two huge problems facing state officials during the spring legislative session. The other, controlling the rising cost of government pensions, is still the subject of intense negotiations and pressures.

And even when both pensions and Medicaid are behind them, legislators will still have to pass a state budget full of grim cuts.

Illinois Medicaid costs have climbed dramatically, thanks to increasing demand in a rough economy and to rising health costs in general. The state is months behind on paying the doctors, hospitals and nursing homes that provide care under Medicaid, and the program takes up scarce dollars that could be used for other important services, like education or public safety.

In February, Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn called for legislators to fill a \$2.7 billion shortfall or face the possibility that the program would collapse entirely. Quinn applauded the General Assembly for Thursday's actions.

"This is the first step toward saving Medicaid for those that rely upon it," Quinn said in a statement that also urged quick action on raising the cigarette tax.

The Medicaid bill is SB 2840.

Illinois residents had mixed reactions to the cuts.

The measure would eliminate Illinois Cares Rx, a program that helps nearly 200,000 seniors pay for prescription drugs, to save about \$72 million

"If they cut it out, it's going to hurt a lot of us seniors. If we can't get the medications, we die," said retired Evanston resident Martha McDonald, who takes five prescription medications and pays less than \$15 a month for them because of the program. "They're helping these young girls having babies, why not the seniors?"

Medicaid pays for more than half the childbirths in Illinois and nearly 94 percent of births to teenage mothers.

Others are relieved by what the measure doesn't include. A Chicago clinic director says he's pleased the bill doesn't cut coverage for undocumented children. Daniel Fulwiler estimates Centro de Salud Esperanza treats hundreds of undocumented children who are covered by state dollars.

The bill includes changes as small as saving \$150,000 by giving nursing home residents only seven days' worth of medicine at a time, instead of 30 days' worth. The reason? Longer prescriptions mean more medicine goes to waste when residents die.

Medicaid clients would also be required to get prior approval for all wheelchair repairs, which is supposed to save \$800,000.

The plan includes new efforts to weed out people in the program who don't meet the proper guidelines. That is supposed to save \$350 million.

How metro-east legislators voted:

Rep. Dan Beiser, D-Alton: Yes

Rep. John Cavaletto, R-Salem: Yes

Rep. Jerry Costello II, D-Smithton: Yes

Rep. Paul Evans, R-O'Fallon: Yes

Rep. Eddie Lee Jackson, D-East St. Louis: No

Rep. Dwight Kay, R-Glen Carbon: Yes

Rep. Scott Penny, D-Fairmont City: Yes

Sen. James Clayborne, D-Belleville: No

Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton: Yes

Sen. John O. Jones, R-Mount Vernon: Yes

Sen. Dave Luechtefeld, R-Okawville: Yes

Sen. Kyle McCarter, R-Lebanon: Yes

Read more here: <http://www.bnd.com/2012/05/24/2187828/illinois-house-votes-to-slash.html#storylink=cpy>