

THE DAILY COURIER

- LOCAL MATTERS -

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Look out Prescott. Be wary Yavapai County. The US Senate is secretly negotiating a plan that will wreck our health care and undermine our economy. And they won't even hold a public hearing!

The Senate's attempt to restructure health care policy will, among other things, wipe out Medicaid expansion, which helps to cover nearly half of our children and makes rural health possible.

These changes will affect millions nationally. But areas like ours will get hit hardest. Numerous analyses of the legislation, such as from Georgetown University Health Policy Institute, all say that the impact of Medicaid cuts will be more prominent in rural communities. The state's recent expansion of Medicaid provides care for many of our children; 44 percent of Yavapai County's children are Medicaid recipients.

Medicaid is a lifeline to more than just children. The proposed cuts would impact middle- and lower-income families. Statewide, over 400,000 adults and 78,000 children who recently gained coverage through Medicaid will lose it.

And 17 percent of Arizona's older adults in small towns and rural communities rely on Medicaid to help them pay for long-term care, live independently in their homes, or secure other necessary health care services not covered by Medicare.

Specifically, here's what gets chopped: early childhood, special education services in public schools, school-based health care services, and even school nurses. States would no longer be required to recognize schools as eligible Medicaid providers. A loss of funding for home and community-based programs that allow seniors and persons with disabilities to stay in their homes and communities would mean many would be out of nursing facilities. Access to healthcare in rural areas like ours will be cut off where many hospitals and health centers rely on Medicaid funding.

Treatment for many people with mental illness and substance abuse disorders will be out of reach without Medicaid coverage.

The state's most influential business lobby, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry has even produced a lengthy statement about the economic harm the legislation would render. They note that the proposed caps on federal Medicaid funding to states would be insufficient to fund Arizona's AHCCCS (Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System) program. Making up the difference would blow a hole in Arizona's budget, jeopardizing vital programs, like public education, public safety, workforce development and transportation. Proposed numbers hit the \$7 billion mark. This health care and economic impact would affect all of us.

This is not about what party you belong to. It's about what community you belong to, and it's not good news for our community.

Act now! Call Sens. Jeff Flake and John McCain. Urge them to vote NO on the bill that has serious consequences. Voice your concerns. A flawed piece of legislation just to claim a political win is not acceptable. Both parties must come together and pass legislation that is good for all. Otherwise, the losers will be the American public and here in Arizona our families, neighbors and friends.

**Rosemary Agneessens and Tom Benson,
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