

WHY MEDICAID MATTERS

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Medicaid is becoming a big issue in New Mexico. If you are not in the health care field, you may not see why that matters to you. But the big changes in the program over the past two years are about to start affecting everyone in this state.

Medicaid got a big boost under the 2010 Affordable Care Act that created what everyone calls “Obamacare.” Obamacare increased federal funding for subsidized health care to low-income households. For states to share in those dollars, they had to open their rolls to more patients.

New Mexico responded by creating Centennial Care – the new name for Medicaid in this state. Four insurance companies contracted to oversee the program. They promised to follow new state regulations that require a large “network” of doctors and other professionals to provide care. The rules basically required networks that are large enough to offer an appointment to any patient within two or three weeks.

If you know the situation with doctors and nurses in New Mexico, you know that we have faced a perpetual shortage going back to the 1990s. There were not enough trained providers to cover the state when I arrived in 2008. The federal government had already declared every county in New Mexico, except Los Alamos, a “health care provider shortage area.”

It did not help the situation when 160,000 new members were added to Centennial Care in 2014. More members have trickled in over the past two years. In the center of the state, the number of eligible patients has increased by two-thirds in the past two years. The number of doctors and nurses has not grown in proportion, so the shortage is growing worse.

Yet, the Centennial Care insurance companies have to find providers for all those new patients. And they have to at least try to schedule appointments within two to three weeks. This has resulted in the insurance companies putting pressure on doctors to accept an unlimited number of Medicaid patients. And this is where the problem will begin to affect us all.

No matter who pays for your healthcare, if you are a patient in New Mexico, you are competing for an appointment slot with a lot of other people. According to the Albuquerque Journal, quoting a survey sponsored by the state in mid-April, Medicaid patients are now waiting three weeks to two months for appointments. It is only a matter of time before those delays begin to affect us all.

Your doctor has a limited number of appointments available each week. When those slots are all full, the only solution is to schedule appointments farther out in time. Much like a traffic jam stretches longer and longer until its cause is cleared away, the volume problem raised by Medicaid will likely stretch on for some time.

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We have to admit that this is a side effect of good news. It is a positive thing that more New Mexicans have access to health care services. Trying to meet everyone's needs is a noble goal. Just be aware that you should consider setting your annual check-up well in advance. Until we find a way to attract more doctors and nurses to this state, delays are going to be a part of life.