

Stubborn refusal

The state's refusal to expand Medicaid affects all of us, even if you have insurance.

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July 18, 2014 | Updated: July 19, 2014 2:51pm

A recent report from the Urban Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation revealed the high cost of governing by what's best described as fits of pique. How else to explain Gov. Rick Perry's steadfast refusal to expand Medicaid, an exercise in stubbornness that costs Texas in general and Houston in particular.

According to the report, the number of uninsured Houston residents could drop by 212,000 people by 2016 - from 744,000 to 531,000 - as a result of Affordable Care Act provisions to extend health insurance coverage to a greater number of people. (The ACA, keep in mind, is Obamacare, which both Perry and the state's outspoken junior senator, Ted Cruz, oppose with a passion.)

That decline is promising, and yet it could be much greater if elected officials would agree to expand the state's Medicaid program, as a number of other states have done under a key ACA provision. Urban Institute contributors to the study estimated that expanding Medicaid in Texas would cover an additional 121,000 uninsured people in Houston alone. That would bring the total number of Houstonians gaining coverage to 333,000 by 2016.

Statewide, according to a recent report from the president's Council of Economic Advisors, Texas will miss out on \$13.73 billion in federal funds in the next three years and Medicaid coverage for another 1.2 million people.

The council also said that expanding the program would protect another 54,100 Texans a year from facing catastrophic health costs exceeding 30 percent of their income. According to the report, an estimated 171,800 Texans each year would be able to keep themselves healthy if Medicaid was expanded. Those are numbers, but the numbers don't reflect the everyday reality of families, usually working-class families with incomes below the poverty level, who are forced to toss the die and hope for the best when it comes to their children's health and their own. Without insurance, you don't go in for checkups; you don't go to the doctor until you're seriously ill; you don't have elective surgery, even though you desperately need it.

The state's refusal to expand Medicaid affects all of us, regardless of whether we have health insurance. Texans who lack insurance rely on emergency rooms; everyone else pays their bills. The lack of health care options also has led to an increase in the number of families enrolling in

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Temporary Assistance for Needy Families - also known as welfare - because enrollment makes them eligible for Medicaid.

The infuriating thing about the obstinacy of Perry and his cohorts is that forfeiting billions in new federal health-care dollars flouts the wishes of local elected officials, the state's medical establishment, the business community and every major Texas city.

It won't be long before Perry rides off into the sunset. It remains to be seen whether his successor will work to reverse his wasteful and unconscionable refusal to provide good, affordable health-care coverage for more Texans.

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