Budget, Medicaid Expansion Top Discussions at Event

Sue Reeves

01/24/2014


Local elected officials met with disability advocates and community members Wednesday evening to discuss topics of interest in advance of the upcoming legislative session. The event was sponsored by the Northern Utah Coalition on Disabilities (which includes the Center for Persons with Disabilities, Grassroots Advocacy Partnership and OPTIONS for Independence) in partnership with the Neighborhood Nonprofit Housing Corp.


As expected, the Medicaid expansion and budget issues were top priorities.

“There will be a Medicare increase whether we do anything or not,” Knudsen said. The requirements have changed, so that many people will qualify for Medicaid who didn’t before, without the state of Utah doing anything.

“Budget-wise, there’s about $25 million worth of new expenses because of the automatic increases that will come with those changes. There is an expansion already built into the system.”

The expansion itself is supposed to cost the state nothing for the first three years, Webb said, but when those three years are over, “that’s 40 million we have to find in the future. These are really complicated issues, with lots of moving parts—how does it affect recipients, how does it affect providers?”

“Right now this is a very political discussion,” Menlove said. “No one is saying there isn’t need. But how do you address that need? Some of that is related to taking money from the federal government. Utah has tried to look for some unique way to look at it that fits our economy and value system. There is no question we need to address the needs of people in the state … I think this is going to be discussed at great length. There are a great many people in the legislature who understand that there is great need.”

Redd agreed with Menlove.

“People are concerned about people with lower income having access to health care,” he said. “How do we best meet the medical needs of that group of people, care that oftentimes will help them get back on their feet?”

As a medical doctor who treats inmates at the Cache County jail, Redd said he sees mostly neglected health care issues.

“The county ends up paying for this,” he said. “We need to make sure people get adequate care.”

Perry said there is a legislative mandate to balance the budget.

“If we go forward with the expansion, we will have to ask the question of where do you want me to cut? Where do we take the money from? Education, higher education, roads? We’re going to have to make those decisions,” he said. “We have to come up with that money from somewhere, and we will have to take something from somebody to make that happen.”

Cherissa Alldredge, Region 1 coordinator for Grassroots Advocacy Partnership, said the following day, “I think that the event was very successful. We had nearly as many attendees as last year and more legislators participated.”

Meeting the needs of the disability community in Cache Valley requires more than support from the social services committee, Alldredge said. Elected officials across a wide array of legislative interests must be made aware of these needs.
“It is critical that advocates continue to involve these, and other elected officials serving on committees that may not focus on disability issues, in their advocacy efforts,” Alldredge said. “Explaining what the needs of the disability community are, how allocated funds are used, and--where possible--helping legislators find opportunities to improve efficiency would all go a long way in what will likely be very difficult budget discussions.”

Weekly legislative updates will be presented by local elected officials in the multi-purpose room at the Cache County office building at 7:30 a.m. every Saturday during the legislative session, beginning Feb. 1.