

## Will Work for Medicaid

Some states want job requirements tied to expansion of health care

The handful of red-state governors and lawmakers who have been willing to expand Medicaid under the 2010 health care law have tried to put their own spin on the program — and one of their favorite ideas has been pushing recipients to find jobs.

The federal Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, which holds that Medicaid is for health insurance, not employment, has so far not granted waivers that would allow states to require Medicaid beneficiaries to enroll in job-search and training programs.

CMS is expected to rule soon on such a waiver sought by Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, who wants to require adult Medicaid recipients to join a mandatory work referral program. Without that requirement, the Republican governor argues, he won't be able to persuade Republican lawmakers in his state to approve his plan to continue its Medicaid expansion beyond the end of 2016. Arizona is seeking a similar waiver.

Forty percent of Arkansas residents who went onto the rolls under expansion — enacted in 2014 by Hutchinson's Democratic predecessor, Mike Beebe — are unemployed, live in places where there are few jobs available and lack skills to land a job. Hutchinson said at a news briefing last month that the new requirement would help beneficiaries "move up the economic



**JUMP STARTER:** Hutchinson looks to help beneficiaries get off Medicaid.

Danny Johnston/AP

### Arkansas and Arizona seek waivers to mandate work-referrals for recipients

ladder.”

“We’re still trying to hone down and identify how we can move these people into work or work training opportunities and move them up the employment ladder so that ultimately they move off the Medicaid expansion,” Hutchinson said.

Frustrated by CMS's refusal to grant such waivers, at least three states — Indiana, Montana and New Hampshire — have connected voluntary work referral programs to their respective Medicaid expansion plans, advertising them to new enrollees as a perk for signing up. In Montana and New Hampshire,

Democratic governors are working with Republican-controlled legislatures, while Republicans hold both houses and the governor's office in Indiana.

Under the 2010 health care law, states could expand Medicaid eligibility to individuals with incomes up to 138 percent of the poverty level starting in 2014. The cost is fully covered by the federal government until 2017, when states that expanded will have to start chipping in. By 2020, states will have to cover 10 percent of the cost. So far, 30 states and the District of Columbia have implemented expansion.

Since May, 153 of the 500 people who participated in the Indiana program's orientation have found jobs such as dishwashing and substitute teaching. Dave Smalley, program administrator for Gateway to Work in Indiana, says it's focused on people who have no work experience when they enroll, and creates individual action plans that identify beneficiaries' strengths and personal barriers.

“I would hope once we get them into entry level [jobs] that we continue to try working with these individuals ... to see what can we do to get them to the next level or get that raise or retain that employment,” Smalley says.

Montana launched its HELP-Link program on Jan. 1, providing services such as résumé assistance and job matching for Medicaid recipients. The program does not yet have job-placement data for the 178 people who have completed the initial self-assessment.

Agency officials say some of the biggest barriers to employment for participants have included previous convictions, poor credit histories and lack of transportation. Participants in rural areas are also facing general lack of job or education opportunities in their community.

Annie Glover, director of public health and economic security initiatives for the Montana Department of Labor and Industry,

says the agency is working with more community organizations to increase its outreach. It hasn't been easy to get Medicaid enrollees to take advantage of the program, especially ones who are already working full-time but could potentially benefit from career advice and more training.

"It's just not something we can communicate easily in a letter or a phone call," Glover says of the work program. "They associate Medicaid with health care so it takes a bit more explanation to talk to them about the added benefits of the program which they might not associate with health insurance."

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Jonathan Gold, says that states are free to do work-referral programs as long as they don't pay for them with Medicaid funds.

"Medicaid's central objective is providing access to health care for low-income residents," Gold says. "That's our central objective and anything outside of that, states are free to supplement in other ways."

Trish Riley, executive director for the National Academy of State Health Policy, says the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program have traditionally done welfare-to-work programs. She says states are trying to find new ways to support low-income people — and get them off Medicaid.

"There's a concern about long-term unemployment among low-income people," Riley says. "Getting them healthy matters, and making sure they're healthy enough to work and they get into programs to help them get into work matters."

— Marissa Evans

## Going to School on 'Every Student Succeeds'

At every point in John B. King Jr.'s path to confirmation as Education secretary, one question dominated the discussion: How would he roll out the bipartisan education legislation that transferred considerable power from the federal government to states and local school districts?

King's position appears to be twofold. At his confirmation hearing before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, he told senators that he supported the autonomy for states mandated in 2015's Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But he also noted that the law, also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, creates guardrails to protect civil rights, and those guardrails are a federal responsibility.

"There's an opportunity here for states to have smarter interventions and districts to have smarter interventions," King said. "But it will also be important for the department to be vigilant after that first set of interventions is put in place."

Not everyone watching that hearing was convinced that King can strike the right balance. He was confirmed March 14 in a vote largely split along partisan lines, 49-40. And before the vote, Heritage Action for America, the lobbying arm of the conservative Heritage Foundation, urged senators to deny King a confirmation.

"Given this administration's record in following the law or working with Congress, no Republican should have had any expectation that anything they wrote was somehow going to



Olivier Douliery/Getty Images

rein in an Obama administration employee," says Dan Holler, the group's vice president of communications and government relations.

Trust in the department's respect for congressional intent to grant greater authority to the states was further eroded by the comments of King's predecessor, Arne Duncan, who told Politico: "Our lawyers are much smarter than many of the folks who were working on this bill."

The Education Trust, which promotes academic achievement for low-income and minority students, is also hoping King will be different from his predecessor — by being more aggressive in the defense of civil rights.

"These protections were enacted by both parties," says Education Trust President Kati Haycock. "The department's role is to make sure they have their intended effect and any efforts already underway to gut them be cut off."

She notes that Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, a Republican, on March 11 signed a bill expanding the number of tests schools can use to evaluate students, which Haycock said could subject students to lower expecta-

tions.

Others, such as Mike Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank, says King would probably have to pick his battles. Since regulations and rules for the ESSA probably won't be finalized before King leaves the post, he'll have to make a difference through his bully pulpit.

"He understands the current politics right now," Petrilli says. "There will be a handful of places he will push and regulate in ways that will make some Republicans uncomfortable."

Petrilli says he expects the civil rights community to weigh in heavily.

Lily Eskelsen García, president of the National Education Association, says she's hoping for the best. King's time pushing the Common Core as the New York state education commissioner was worrisome to her. But a few weeks ago she traveled with him to Berlin for an education summit and witnessed him focus on equity and cultural competency.

"It was at this summit that I really thought, 'I'm hearing something different, I'm hearing something new,'" García says. "And what I heard really were a lot of good questions."

The experience didn't give her complete confidence that King will give states and local departments adequate power to change their education systems under the new law. But she's willing to hope.

"We'll see, we'll see," she says. "I want to give him the benefit of the doubt."

— Emily Wilkins