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WS

# Gov. Robert Bentley's task force recommends Medicaid expansion

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Health Care Improvement Task Force.jpg

The Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force met at the Montgomery County Health Department on Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2015.

( )

A task force appointed by Gov. Robert Bentley today recommended that the governor and the Legislature find a way to provide health insurance for Alabamians without coverage.

The [Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force](#) approved a recommendation that said the biggest obstacle in improving health is the "coverage gap that makes health insurance inaccessible to hundreds of thousands of Alabamians."

The majority of that group are working people who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but don't have private insurance, according to the Task Force

statement.

It said expansion could provide coverage to about 290,000 Alabamians, including 185,000 who are working.

The recommendation does not specifically call for Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. But a two-page statement attached to the recommendation describes benefits that would come with expansion.

The Task Force recommended that the governor and the Legislature "move forward at the earliest opportunity to close Alabama's health coverage gap with an Alabama-driven solution."

The task force, which has more than 30 members, approved the recommendation on a voice vote with no opposition.

For several years, Bentley has been an opponent of expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

In the last year, the governor has said his administration might pursue a way to cover more people through an Alabama-specific plan. He has sounded [increasingly more open to the idea in recent weeks.](#)

Jennifer Ardis, spokeswoman for the governor, indicated the governor has not taken a position on today's recommendation by the task force.

"The governor appreciates the hard work of the task force, which is made up of health care experts across Alabama," Ardis said. "He looks forward to working with the Legislature to review the recommendations."

Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, a task force member, said Medicaid expansion is critical for rural areas like his east Alabama district.

But Dial told his fellow task force members that expansion will come with a price tag. States will have to begin paying 5 percent of the cost of expanded coverage in 2018 and 10 percent in 2020.

Dial said it's realistic to expect Alabama to need an additional \$400 million to

\$700 million over several years.

"Somebody is going to have to pay some more taxes," Dial said.

Dial urged members of the task force to speak one-on-one with legislators in their districts to build support for expansion and the funds needed to pay for it.

"We can't sell it from Montgomery," Dial said.

The task force discussed but did not vote on a proposal to recommend to the Legislature a cigarette tax increase of 75 cents a pack to help pay for expansion.

Lawmakers raised the cigarette tax 25 cents a pack this year to help cover the General Fund appropriation for Medicaid. Dial said passing that bill was "like pulling teeth."

There was some disagreement about how much new funding would be needed.

The task force's two-page statement attached to the recommendation, which task force members called the "white paper," said that expansion could be a net gain for the state budget, based on what's happened in other states.

That's partly because some mental health services, public health services, senior services and others that are now provided with state dollars would be mostly paid for with federal dollars after expansion, according to the paper.

The paper cited a 2015 policy brief by the UAB School of Public Health that said Medicaid expansion would produce new revenues to health care providers that would result in \$1.2 billion per year in new income.

That would generate tax revenues that could offset most or all of the state's share of the cost, the paper said.

Dr. John Waits, a family practice physician in Centreville and a task force member, said Medicaid expansion would not only help the uninsured but

would improve the economy by creating jobs and providing for a healthier workforce.

"It keeps hospitals open," Waits said. "It keeps doctors able to go to underserved areas and pay their employees and keep the practice open."

The Affordable Care Act allowed states to use federal funds to expand Medicaid coverage to low-income adults who earn up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$16,000 a year for an individual and \$33,000 a year for a family of four.

Thirty states and the District of Columbia have done so, according to the Task Force.

Task Force member Jim Carnes, policy director for Alabama Arise, said the panel's approval of the recommendation was a "bold statement."

"This task force represents the full gamut of health care stakeholders in Alabama," Carnes said. "A statement from this task force we think is the strongest one yet that we simply have to find a way to cover the uninsured in Alabama."

Democrats in the Alabama Legislature have called for Medicaid expansion for several years.

Sen. Quinton Ross of Montgomery, Senate minority leader, issued a statement tonight saying that the issue has been studied enough.

"I think it is clear that we need to expand Medicaid, based on the recommendation of the task force, and based on what the Democratic Caucus has been saying all along," Ross said. "The best thing the governor can do for the citizens of the state of Alabama and the state's economy is to expand Medicaid."

[Health Care Improvement Task Force recommendation.](#)

## Alabama Health Care Improv

November 18, 20

Governor Bentley,

On April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, in Executive Order Number 4, you no  
in Alabama features high rates of infant mortality and chr  
because of physician and dentist shortages and hospital cl  
affordable health insurance. To this end, you created the A  
Task Force and charged it to bring recommendations that  
Alabamians” and make health care “more accessible and i

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