



Bentley: Budget will force tough cuts to Medicaid

AP AL State Wire

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Published: Yesterday

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - Gov. Robert Bentley on Wednesday warned that Alabama will see painful reductions in Medicaid services under a budget approved this week by the Alabama Legislature.

Bentley and Medicaid Commissioner Stephanie Azar held a news conference at the Alabama Capitol and laid out potential Medicaid cuts, including harsh options such as eliminating prescription drug coverage for adults or requiring patients to go to one big box pharmacy through a preferred provider program.

"There are going to be people suffering because of what we have to do to implement some of these cuts," Bentley said.

The news conference came a day after lawmakers overrode Bentley's budget veto to enact the \$1.8 billion spending plan for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. The governor said the approved budget is \$85 million short of the minimum amount needed to adequately fund the state's Medicaid program.

Azar said other options including eliminating a reimbursement rate bump for primary care doctors and eliminating coverage for outpatient dialysis, eyeglasses for adults and prosthetics and orthotics.

"Any combination of these cuts to our program are real, painful cuts," Azar said. "It's important for everyone to know what the potential impact will be."

The Medicaid commissioner said the state also will have to halt a plan to transition the system to managed care and forfeit \$747 million in federal funds for the effort over the next five years.

Medicaid provides health care to nearly 1 million in Alabama, but Bentley said the funds Medicaid provides to doctors, hospitals and providers are the "underpinning" of the state's health care system.

The public discussion was intended to get the attention of citizens, health care providers and legislators as Bentley continues to push for more money for Medicaid. The governor has previously hinted that he might call a special session on Medicaid funding, but said Wednesday that he was undecided.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh said Tuesday that lawmakers were unwilling, at this time, to raise taxes or cut education spending or other agencies in order to boost Medicaid funding. He urged the governor to hold off on calling a special session.

"We would be wise to let the voters determine if in fact this funding to Medicaid is a problem. Until we determine that it would be a problem, I don't see the sense in coming back. I don't think we'd have any different outcome. We're open to listening to our constituents. Right now I think they expect us to live within our means, which we've done," Marsh said.