

# Social media campaign started to advocate state Medicaid support

By Patrick McCreless, Star Staff Writer, pmccreless@annistonstar.com | Posted: Wednesday, April 20, 2016 5:29 pm

Advocacy groups for children and the poor started a social media campaign Tuesday to raise public opposition to pending cuts to the state's Medicaid program.

The goal of the #IamMedicaid campaign, launched by nonprofits Alabama Arise and Alabama Children First, is to give a voice to people whom the cuts would affect. Representatives from the nonprofits say they hope the campaign will raise enough support to sway the Alabama Legislature to reconsider the recently passed 2017 budget and fully fund Medicaid.

The two groups officially announced the campaign at a press conference in Montgomery on Wednesday. The nonprofits had already spent the previous day encouraging Medicaid recipients to participate in the program through the social media site Twitter. They also created a Facebook page for #IamMedicaid and a website at [www.iammedicaid.com](http://www.iammedicaid.com).

"We feel like we've heard a lot about the numbers and the budget shortfall and Medicaid spreadsheets, but we haven't given the microphone to families who depend on Medicaid," said Jim Carnes, policy director for Alabama Arise, a nonprofit that advocates for people in poverty. "And we wanted to respond to statements made by legislative leadership that they aren't hearing anything."

More than two weeks ago, the Legislature approved a budget \$85 million short of what Medicaid officials say will be needed to keep the program's services operating at current levels. Senate and House leaders have said there was no interest in finding the extra \$85 million to pay for the program and that the Legislature should live within its means.

Alabama Medicaid is a joint state-and-federal program that provides health care coverage to about 1 million of the state's poorest, mainly children and the disabled.

Among the cuts Medicaid officials are considering: eliminating adult prescription drug coverage to save around \$50 million. Other services on the potential chopping block are coverage for outpatient dialysis and prosthetics. Cuts in payments to primary care physicians are also a possibility.

Christy Cain, executive director of Alabama Children First, which advocates for policies that help children, said the cuts will affect far more people in the state than just Medicaid recipients and she hopes the campaign will help explain that impact.

"Medicaid affects our whole, entire healthcare system ... rural hospitals especially serve Medicaid patients," Cain said. "If they can't get those matching federal dollars because of the cuts, it'll be hard for them to stay open."

Cain said the same would be true for pediatricians, noting that some might decide to leave the state to make more money should their Medicaid payments be reduced.

"Then nobody can use that pediatrician," Cain said.

While legislators say there's no interest in raising taxes, there appears to be public support for doing so to improve state health care, according to an annual public survey by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, a nonprofit that provides nonpartisan research to help improve state and local government.

The latest survey, conducted in January, shows that out of 466 Alabamians surveyed, 63.7 percent believed the state budget inadequately funds health care. Also, 58.4 percent of respondents supported paying more taxes to avoid cuts to health care.

Thomas Spencer, senior research associate for PARCA, said the survey has maintained similar results over the years. The problem is that many of the people surveyed also don't trust the Legislature to properly spend any new tax money.

"The trick is to present a proposal that makes people believe that the Legislature will spend it right," Spencer said.

Ryan Hankins, executive director for PARCA, said another problem with the cuts is the effects they'll have on Medicaid in the long term. Along with a decline in services, the cuts would mean an end to the state's plan to reform the Medicaid program.

Lawmakers in 2013 approved a sweeping plan to place the state under a managed-care-like system expected to slow the growth in the cost of Medicaid. State officials earlier this year got approval for hundreds of millions in federal money it needs to put the managed-care plan in place.

The state needed to use some of its own money to get the federal dollars, though — money that won't be spent now because of the cuts.

Dane Howard, executive vice president for the Alabama Hospital Association, said no reform means a continued struggle to find enough money to reimburse hospitals for treating Medicaid patients.

"If we had the ability to manage that care and make sure people took their medications and had proper transportation, we could catch problems before they occur, which leads to less cost for health care and leads to a healthier population, which also lowers costs," Howard said.

Meanwhile, the effects of an inadequately funded health care system will trickle into other state priorities, including education, advocates say.

"You can pour an infinite amount of money into education or an infinite amount of money into workforce development, but if a student population is sick or



Alabama State House

The Alabama State House in Montgomery.

hungry, you can't buy enough technology to fill their stomachs or help them when they're sick," Hankins said.