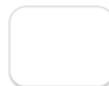


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## Legislature votes to push back deadline on Alabama Medicaid reform

Agency head predicts cuts in health care services provided to poor patients

By Tim Lockette, Star Staff Writer, [tlockette@annistonstar.com](mailto:tlockette@annistonstar.com) May 4, 2016

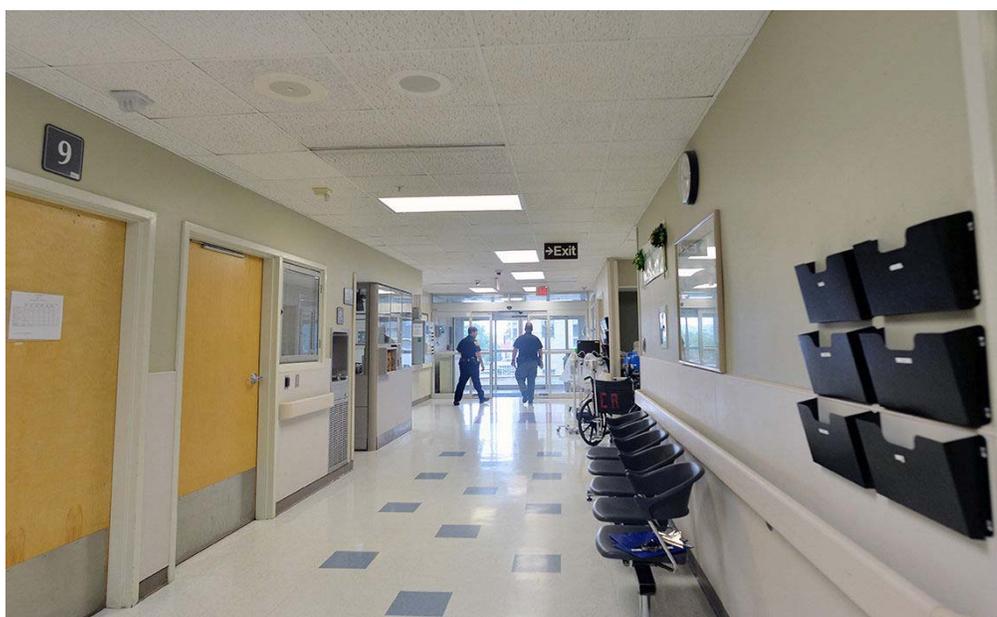


Photo by Bill Wilson / The Anniston Star  
RMC emergency room on Tuesday

**MONTGOMERY** — Citing a lack of money, Alabama lawmakers voted Wednesday to delay the Oct. 1 start of a Medicaid reform plan they overwhelmingly approved in 2013.

Senators voted Wednesday 26-1 to approve the delay, which has already passed the House.

"Unless we change this date, we're going to significantly limit the opportunity we have to move forward on this reform measure which we have all been focused on," said Sen. Greg Reed, R-Jasper.

Alabama has struggled for years to pay for its Medicaid program. Part of the problem is a surge in enrollment in Medicaid, a joint state-and-federal health care system for the poor, since the 2008 recession.

Another problem for Alabama is its approach to budgeting. Schools get the proceeds from sales and income tax, which grow with the economy. Most other agencies, including Medicaid, are paid for through the General Fund, which doesn't grow fast, if at all.

Lawmakers have used stop-gap measures year after year to give Medicaid more money. In 2013, they

voted for a sweeping reform of the program, placing many patients under managed-care-like agencies in hopes of slowing the growth in the program's costs.

That plan has foundered on Alabama's longstanding budget problem. Medicaid says it needs \$785 million to keep up current services in 2017 — and without keeping up those services, Medicaid officials say, the federal government won't allow creation of a managed care system.

Lawmakers so far have cobbled together only \$700 million. A bill that would have cashed in on a settlement in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill would have freed up another \$70 million for the program. That bill died Tuesday, due to disagreements about how to split up the BP money.

The failure of the BP bill had the state's Medicaid commissioner saying Wednesday morning that cuts are likely, though she said she wouldn't release a detailed plan of cuts until she consults with Gov. Robert Bentley.

"If we don't get proper funding, our program's going to change," Medicaid Commissioner Stephanie Azar.



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Medicaid officials in the past have said that coverage of dialysis, hospice care and prosthetics are on the chopping block, though reductions in reimbursements to doctors are also possible. Medicaid

officials are reluctant to make those cuts, citing a possible exodus by physicians in rural and high-poverty areas.

The legislative session ends Wednesday.

"Alabama's looming Medicaid cuts could be devastating for our most vulnerable neighbors," Kimble Forrister, director of the nonprofit group Alabama Arise, was quoted as saying in a statement released Tuesday night. Arise has been part of a coalition of hospital groups and child advocates who've campaigned for Medicaid funding.

Gov. Robert Bentley earlier this year said he'd bring lawmakers back for a special session if they didn't fund Medicaid. Later he backed away from that plan.

Attempts to reach Bentley's spokeswoman for comment Wednesday morning were not successful.

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