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Waiting on a wavier: Change to AL's healthcare system could be around corner

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BIRMINGHAM, AL (WSFA) - The future of Alabama's Regional Care Organizations (RCOs) could depend on the ability to get an 1115 wavier approved by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS). Governor Robert Bentley said if the wavier is approved, it could mean almost a billion dollars for the state.

The governor thinks the wavier will be approved, as it will be funded appropriately. Lawmakers did not cut the RCO program and, like prison reform, the RCO's will cost some start up money. But they will eventually save the state money.

When asked about Medicaid expansion the governor said:

“I would say that we are certainly looking at that. Not right now. We are not at that stage right now. We do have to realistically look at whether we have adequate funding for rural doctors, primary care doctors. They can not treat a third of their patients for free and stay in business.”

The big change under the RCOs is that the state will be split into five regions. These regions will be responsible for taking on some of the risk and helping with care of most Medicaid patients. By localizing the care patients will be able to get more help navigating the healthcare system, according to Dr. Robert Moon, deputy commissioner of the Alabama Medicaid Health Systems.

Moon said each patient should be able to get a case worker to help make sure the patient gets the care they need. Another change, according to Moon, will be how payments are given out by the RCOs.

"That's a pretty fundamental shift in how things go," Moon said. "It's not based on how many times you see the doctor. It's based off how effective those visits are." Currently the system is more based on volume, or the amount of visits a doctor has. Moon wants the system to be based more on results, and getting patients better.

Moon said simplifying the system might help with some of the red tape that follows the medical profession.

"We hope to see a system that works smoother and better and works to get treatments and take care that they need to have and have a more efficient method and hopes to see less waste," Moon said.

Even with these improvements Moon admits that, "driving improvement in the healthcare system is a never ending business I's not like you get to a certain point and everything is perfect and we're done. Let's just keeping doing this," he explained.

The RCOs hope to see the wavier approved by the new year. If they get approval, it would keep them on track for the switch over on October 1, 2016.

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