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“Healthy Ohio” plan would undermine public health; Policy Matters urges federal government to say ‘no’

Proposal would weaken Medicaid, disproportionately hurt minority families

Proposed changes to Ohio’s Medicaid program would endanger access to health care for hundreds of thousands of Ohioans and disrupt progress made through Medicaid expansion, Policy Matters Ohio told the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Ohio lawmakers are asking the federal government for permission to impose premiums and some higher co-pays on Medicaid enrollees, under what they call the “Healthy Ohio” plan. Under the proposal, enrollees who depend on Medicaid because they can’t afford health insurance could be kicked out for non-payment and locked out until they pay the debt.

Many Ohioans eligible for Medicaid coverage would not enroll and many enrolled in Medicaid would be forced out, Policy Matters said in written comments to the government. The state itself projects 125,000 to 150,000 fewer people will be enrolled each year in Medicaid under the five-year demonstration project proposal compared to the current program. Research suggests enrollment could fall by as much as 15 percent, threatening the health of individuals and the financial stability of health-care providers.

One-quarter of Ohioans are insured through Medicaid. Ohio expanded the program under the Affordable Care Act, and subsequent research showed the expansion led to improvements in public health and in health-care system finances.

“A decline in Medicaid enrollment will hurt patients and providers, and disproportionately harm minority communities,” said Wendy Patton, Policy Matters’ budget analyst who has studied the “Healthy Ohio” proposal.

“Ohio is asking the federal government to waive certain Medicaid rules to allow the changes. But waiving the rules is only allowed if the changes strengthen coverage or provider networks, improve quality of care or health outcomes. ‘Healthy Ohio’ does none of those things,” Patton said. “We urge the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to deny Ohio’s request.”

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute
with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.*