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Gov. Terry McAuliffe brings health care campaign to Hampton Roads



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Gov. Terry McAuliffe visited Maryview Hospital in Portsmouth Monday afternoon to promote the Medicaid expansion program for Virginia tax payers.

By Dave Ress, dress@dailypress.com

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PORTSMOUTH — Gov. Terry McAuliffe took his campaign for coverage for poor Virginians to a Portsmouth hospital that serves some of the state's lowest income neighborhoods, where staff fear for their employers' long-term financial viability and where visitors to its free clinic say they have no options for care

During a visit to **Bon Secours** Maryview Hospital and the free clinic next door Monday, McAuliffe said he hopes a two-week cooling off period between the end of the General Assembly session last Saturday and the special session he has called for March 24 will give House of Delegates Republicans a chance to hear from the public and change their minds about a state Senate proposal to tap **Obamacare** tax dollars to buy health insurance for low-income Virginians.

When lawmakers return to Richmond, McAuliffe said he will present concrete proposals for using that health care coverage to save the state some of the hundreds of millions of dollars now going for community mental health services and non-medical support services for people with disabilities.

It could be a way to transform a mental health system most admit is broken, he said, without an additional demand on the state budget. Advocates for expanding coverage believe the chance to do that could tip the balance and convince some members of the House to change their stance.

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Asked if any savings to the state through expanding coverage could translate into tax cuts, he said he and his cabinet were considering a number of proposals they might make.

"To be fair," Secretary of Health and Human Resources William Hazel interjected, "we've only had 72 hours since the legislature didn't act on the budget."

McAuliffe heard from **Portsmouth** surgeon Mark Kerner that he worried that "Maryview might no longer exist" without some help paying for care for the uninsured.

The hospital, which collected \$310 million in fees in 2012, provided \$77 million in charity care that year and had to swallow \$28 million in bad debt, according to financial data compiled by Virginia Health Information, a nonprofit service run by the state's business community, insurers and health care providers.

McAuliffe also heard from Carol Woodley, a patient at the Maryview Healthcare Foundation Health Care Center who lost her job last year and can't afford coverage. Woodley said she has no choices for care other than that free clinic.

"If it wasn't for this place, by now I probably would have had another stroke," she said.

Roughly 90 percent of the clinic's 3,600 patients could get health insurance through an expansion of **Medicaid**, giving them more options and freeing up slots for the roughly 2,000 people the clinic has to turn away, Maryview officials said.

McAuliffe hopes House Republicans are hearing similar stories.

So far, they don't seem to be.

"I guess he thinks with his campaigning, he is going to sell the public," said Speaker of the House William Howell, R-Stafford.

"We've gone home, we're talking to people in church, at the Rotary, at Kiwanis. Except for the hospital people, I'm not hearing that people want to expand Medicaid," Howell said. "I think my guys are pretty firm."

He said he's worried about a slew of costs he thinks McAuliffe is overlooking when he says expanding coverage would free up taxpayer funds for other state needs.

Those include additional administrative expenses at the state Medicaid agency, and the bill for covering people who are eligible for Medicaid but didn't realize it until they tried to buy individual coverage through the Affordable Care Act's insurance exchanges.

Those could boost state taxpayers' costs by more than \$1 billion by the time Washington would require the state to pay for 10 percent of the cost of expanding Medicaid after 2021, Howell said.

When he outlines those concerns, Howell said, he finds most of his constituents support his stand.

"We're not the ones drawing a line in the sand," he said. "We should pass a clean budget now and then discuss Medicaid expansion in a special session."

Ress can be reached by phone at 757-247-4535.