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Health, Education and Human Services Committee receives report overview of Arizona Medicaid program and future potential changes

WINDOW ROCK – On Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received and accepted a report from two individuals providing a brief overview of the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System and the potential funding issues it may face depending on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

Eric Descheenie, chief of staff for the Navajo legislative branch, and Mike Bielecki, a lobbyist for Navajo issues at the Arizona state legislature level, presented on the state of AHCCCS – the Arizona’s Medicaid program.

According to Bielecki, enrollment in AHCCCS has grown from 800,000 members in 2007 to its current size of almost 1.2 million. Even with budget cuts, expenses to fund the system have increased from \$1.4 billion in 2003 to its current amount at over \$2 billion.

Thousands of Navajos – both on and off the Nation – are served by AHCCCS, which also provides for “significant funding for health care facilities within the Nation,” Bielecki said.

The largest increase in eligibility for a new population occurred in 2000, when the passage of Proposition 204 expanded Medicaid eligibility for Arizona residents with incomes less than 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, from 34% previously, which included parents and childless adults.

In an effort to cut costs, the Arizona legislature in 2011 acted to phase-out single, childless adults from being eligible for AHCCCS.

Bielecki and Descheenie both commended AHCCCS director, Tom Betlach, for his instrumental role in advocating for a waiver to allow for the exemption of Indian Health Service and Tribal 638 medical programs from the phase-out.

If it weren’t for Betlach’s efforts, the Nation’s health facilities “would have taken devastating hits,” said Descheenie, meaning that Navajos who are childless adults at 100% or less of the federal poverty level would not continue to be eligible to enroll in AHCCCS.

“This represents a victory for the Navajos who need AHCCCS funded health care,” Bielecki said.

Though it took months for waiver exemption request from Arizona Governor Jan Brewer’s office to process at the Department of Health and Human Services and its Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “there was a great deal of excellent work done in the process by the Navajo elected leadership from both branches (executive and judicial) and the Navajo Division of Health,” Bielecki stated.

The future of AHCCCS and its impacts on Navajos benefitting from the program will differ depending on whether President Barack Obama is re-elected or Republican nominee Mitt Romney assumes the role of the next U.S. President.

If Romney is elected, Bielecki said there are concerns that “there may be new moves to attack the Affordable Care Act on a national level and reduce the AHCCCS program in Arizona.”

If President Obama wins re-election, the ACA or “Obama Care” is more likely to be implemented. As such, AHCCCS will be in a position to move forward on implementing elements of Obama Care.

AHCCCS will have the option of setting up its own “state-managed health insurance exchange” that would enable people to go online to look at, compare, and enroll in available private insurance policies.

To fully inform Navajo leadership of the affects that potential changes to AHCCCS may cause to the health care of the Navajo people, Navajo Nation Speaker Johnny Naize has extended an open invitation for AHCCCS director Tom Betlach to provide a report on the program before the Naa’ bik’iyati Committee in early November.

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