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Erie Times-News

WEEKEND

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Health providers in Fayette County brace for Medicaid cuts



Fayette County, which includes Connellsville, above, trails only Philadelphia in its Medicaid enrollment rates. Almost a third of the county’s residents and more than half its children depend on the program. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SALLY MAXSON

‘Not providing health care is also expensive’

Bethany Rodgers USA TODAY NETWORK

Courtney Blocker, a 33-year-old from a southwestern Pennsylvania coal community, found out she’d lost her insurance coverage at a pharmacy counter while trying to replenish her supply of insulin. • Diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes as a child, Blocker relies on a pump to deliver a regular drip of the medication, risking life-threatening acid buildup in her bloodstream if she doesn’t have it. But with the each vial priced at up to \$300, she can only afford the treatment through Medicaid, a government health insurance program for low-income Americans. • That day, about two years ago, the pharmacist told her the program had kicked her out. • “You have to have (insulin) to live,” she said. “They’re just like, ‘Oh, no, now you can’t get it.’” • The only way Blocker pulled through while she scrambled to re-enroll, she says, was by borrowing an insulin vial from a friend who also had diabetes.

Her issue was something of a fluke, related to a paperwork error at the county benefits office, she recalls. But health experts say millions across the U.S. could soon face a similar loss of coverage because of new hurdles created by the One Big Beautiful Bill, the massive tax package passed this year by congressional Republicans. And they predict the fallout of President Donald Trump’s marquee bill will land particularly heavily on some of the very rural communities that put these GOP politicians in office. Fayette County, where Blocker lives, is one of these places. In Pennsylvania, the once-prosperous coal mining hub trails only Philadelphia in its Medicaid

enrollment rates, with almost a third of the county’s residents and more than half its children and youth depending on the program. About a tenth of Fayette County’s Medicaid users, or 4,080 people, will lose their coverage because of forthcoming work requirements and other aspects of the “big beautiful” bill, state officials have estimated. This rise in uninsured and projected drop of \$50 billion in federal Medicaid funding in Pennsylvania over the coming decade could squeeze fragile health systems that have managed to survive in rural areas, advocates say.

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“Health care is expensive,” said Dave Rider, head of Fayette County’s behavioral health administration. “And not providing health care is also expensive.”

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Online programs help with declines

Jim Martin and Valerie Myers
Erie Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Colleges use the term demographic cliff to describe the decline in enrollment that resulted from a national decline in birth rates. But that’s not the only challenge faced by higher education. Concerns about student debt and changing perceptions about the value of a college education have also contributed to a gathering storm for the nation’s colleges. And colleges in northwestern Pennsylvania, and across the nation, found themselves faced this year with a new challenge — visa delays and cancellations have many global students staying at home or looking elsewhere.

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