

## Revamped Medicaid Suspension Sought

Written by Administrator

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Revamped Medicaid suspension sought

Poor are punished, critics say

By [Eric Eyre](#) – Charleston Gazette Staff writer

A coalition of groups called on state officials to suspend West Virginia's redesigned Medicaid health insurance plan Wednesday, saying the program penalizes poor children and adults.

The coalition - made up of religious, labor and health-care activists - said West Virginia's revamped Medicaid program simply isn't working.

Only 5.5 percent of adults and 7.5 percent of children on Medicaid statewide have signed "personal responsibility" agreements to improve their health in exchange for expanded benefits - the cornerstone of the state's new plan, according to the coalition's findings. That leaves an overwhelming majority of Medicaid beneficiaries - mostly children - with "bare-bones" health care, coalition members said Wednesday.

"The redesign is about saving money and denying services," said Renate Pore, co-chairwoman of the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition. "Why would we want to deny a service to a child because their parent hasn't jumped through some bureaucratic hoop? This is not good policy."

The state Medicaid office issued a sharp rebuke to coalition members' comments Wednesday.

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State Health and Human Resources Secretary Martha Walker's alleged the group's leaders "were satisfied with the status quo," and "maintaining the status quo is their job security."

Walker said it was too early to judge the revamped Medicaid program - called Mountain Health Choices - because it's only been up and running statewide for five months. Walker said the Medicaid changes would improve West Virginians' health and reduce costs.

"We're not going to suspend the program," Walker said. "We feel what we're doing is the right thing."

The state's new Medicaid approach - the first of its kind in the country - includes incentives to entice low-income people to take steps to improve their health.

The "enhanced" benefit package requires people to see a doctor, keep appointments and stay out of the hospital emergency room. In exchange, they get expanded health services, such as access to cardiac rehabilitation and smoking cessation classes.

"We're teaching people to be accountable and responsible because they can," Walker said. "We're trying to give people an opportunity to make good choices, and when they make good decisions, to reward them. Instead of sickness, we're going to promote good health."

Most Medicaid recipients, however, have opted for a scaled-back "basic" package that has fewer benefits than traditional Medicaid. The basic plan limits people to four prescriptions a month - though some lifesaving drugs are exempt. The state's new Medicaid approach - the first of its kind in the country - includes incentives to entice low-income people to take steps to improve their health. The "enhanced" benefit package requires people to see a doctor, keep appointments and stay out of the hospital emergency room. In exchange, they get expanded health services, such as access to cardiac rehabilitation and smoking cessation classes.

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"Because Medicaid is not fixed, people are losing benefits, children are losing benefits," Pore said.

Coalition members said the redesigned Medicaid program, which they described as "radical," has been especially harmful to children with mental illness.

"Why are we punishing a child because a parent hasn't signed up for enhanced benefits?" said Todd Garland of Catholic Charities. "We are jeopardizing the health and well-being of the 180,000 West Virginia children who depend of Medicaid through these flawed policies."

Walker said the agency was working with behavior health centers to ensure children receive appropriate mental health care.

The coalition - called Families and Children Educate the State on Medicaid - said many Medicaid recipients remain confused about the program's new requirements. Some beneficiaries don't find out that they're on the basic plan until they're denied services and prescriptions, said Evelyn Dortch, executive director of Direct Action Welfare Group.

"Families do not understand the new program or how to access benefits," Dortch said. "Medicaid redesign hurts more families than it helps."

Coalition members suggested that the state put people on traditional Medicaid or on the enhanced plan after suspending the existing program.

The coalition supports a separate state initiative - called the West Virginia Health Improvement Institute - that assigns teams of doctors and other health specialists to work with patients to prevent and treat illnesses.

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"It holds the possibility of both improving the health of all West Virginians, including Medicaid members, and controlling costs," said Perry Bryant, executive director of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care.

Walker said the Health Improvement Institute was a spin-off of Medicaid redesign. "I wish they would put as much energy in helping make this work as they've put into being naysayers," she said.