

## Religious groups push for Kasich's Medicaid expansion

By JoAnne Viviano

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Members of the faith community are stepping up efforts to encourage state lawmakers to back Gov. John Kasich's plan to open government-subsidized Medicaid insurance coverage to an additional 275,000 low-income Ohioans.

The Ohio Council of Churches, local leaders of the United Methodist and Roman Catholic churches, and others plan to visit the Statehouse on Tuesday to show support for the proposal. They'll hold a news conference and make stops at the offices of various legislators.

"This is a major public-policy initiative and moment," said the Rev. John Edgar, pastor of the United Methodist Church for All People on the South Side. "There are tens of thousands of Ohio citizens who will for the first time have health insurance when this passes.

"People's lives will be saved, quality of life will improve, and we will have less financial stress."

Kasich is one of at least eight Republican governors supporting Medicaid expansion, an option under the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act. The federal government would fully fund the program for three years and partially fund it for several years beyond that. Kasich said it will return \$13 billion to Ohio over seven years.

But it's a hard sell among many GOP lawmakers, and the Statehouse visit is one of a number of initiatives among religious groups pushing for passage.

Among them: the Ohio Council of Churches has posted a letter to the General Assembly on its website, inviting supporters to sign on. Local churches are hosting community meetings of the Central Ohio Medicaid Expansion Coalition. And the bishop of the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church plans to send a letter encouraging support to its roughly 1,100 congregations.

In his State of the State speech last month, Kasich turned to his Christian faith to support the proposal, saying the lessons he learned from the Bible run his life.

“For those that live in the shadows of life, those who are the least among us, I will not accept the fact that the most vulnerable in our state should be ignored,” he said. “The Lord doesn’t want us to ignore them.”

The push for Medicaid expansion has galvanized religious groups across the state, said Cathy Levine, executive director of the Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio. The Central Ohio Medicaid Expansion Coalition has robust participation by the faith community, which looks beyond philosophical debate and “reminds us what we want to be as a society,” she said.

Along with Christian, Jewish and Islamic organizations, the coalition includes health-care providers, businesses and consumer advocates. The Rev. Tim Ahrens, senior pastor at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Downtown, is the group’s convener. He called Kasich’s words of support for Medicaid expansion “very moving.”

“The governor is behind it, but it’s still a fight in the legislature simply because it’s seen as ‘Obamacare,’” he said. “How hard it really is to bring people together to care for the poorest of the poor. It shouldn’t be this hard. It’s the heart and soul of our faith.”

Rabbi Misha Zinkow at Temple Israel on the East Side, a coalition member, said groups of various faiths have long worked to help people who can’t afford health care.

“Jewish tradition teaches us that we are responsible to take care of the needy in our midst,” he said. “Politics aside, just from a religious imperative ... it certainly propels us toward doing our best to offer a safety net to help people who can’t afford health care.”

The Central Ohio Medicaid Expansion Coalition will hold community meetings from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on Thursday at Westerville Community United Church of Christ, 770 County Line Rd., and from 6 to 7:30 p.m. on March 15 at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, 3730 Broadway, in Grove City.

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