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Christopher Kozak: Medicaid expansion should be permanent in NH

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Christopher Kozak

IN 2016, advocates for persons with mental illness and those dealing with addiction, including the New Hampshire Community Behavioral Health Association, declared that Medicaid expansion was the most important proposal the state General Court would consider that year.

Recently, at a press conference in the Legislative Office Building in Concord, CBHA joined with the same advocates — as well as with representatives of business and industry — to reiterate the critical need for continuing expansion and to emphasize that New Hampshire needs to make the program permanent in 2023.

The expansion program – now called the Granite Advantage Health Care Program – ensures that many Granite State residents who need mental health care and substance abuse and addiction treatment can get access to services. But this is due to expire on December 31st unless the Legislature passes a bill that reauthorizes it, and that action needs to take place before the session ends on June 30th.

While we are heartened by public statements of Governor Chris Sununu and legislative leaders supporting Medicaid expansion, we need to reach all our lawmakers and emphasize how the program provides critical care to people in their communities.

Data from the Division of Medicaid Services show that the Granite Advantage Health Care Program provides access to more than 90,000 New Hampshire residents. The fact that so many individuals have used the program at one time or another over the past eight years – when it was first enacted as the New Hampshire Health Protection Program – shows its true strength: it gives working people a hand up, not a handout, and helps them transition to the next place in their lives.

This is particularly true for those in need of mental health care and substance abuse and addiction treatment. In 2022, more than 11,000 individuals enrolled in the program received mental health outpatient services; almost 30,000 used mental health medication treatment; and almost 9,000 received substance use disorder (SUD) outpatient services.

New Hampshire's opioid and SUD crisis continues to be a major concern for all of us. The impact of untreated mental illness and addiction on the workplace is one reason that the business community so strongly supports reauthorization of the program this year. The N.H. Business and Industry Association's recently issued "2023 Public Policy Priorities" includes this legislative priority item: "Support permanent reauthorization for expanded Medicaid."

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The Commission to Evaluate the Effectiveness and Future of the New Hampshire Granite Advantage Health Care Program – a 16-member commission established by statute in 2018 to provide oversight of Medicaid expansion – recently voted unanimously to recommend reauthorization of the program. The commission directed the Department of Health and Human Services to report the Mathematica Inc. findings about the program to key legislative committees in 2023 as they consider reauthorization, so they will see the numbers for themselves.

From its inception, this has been a uniquely New Hampshire program, using federal dollars to move the uninsured to the commercial market. Our governor and the majority of legislators have clearly seen the value and the cost-effectiveness of the program.

For the many individuals and families in this state who are dealing with mental health issues and addiction, the program is a lifeline. We need the Granite Advantage Health Care Program to be reauthorized and made permanent this year, because we need to keep moving forward as a state.

Christopher Kozak is president of Community Partners in Dover, a member of the N.H. Community Behavioral Health Association. He lives in Portsmouth.