

Western New York Officials Push For County Control In Medicaid Cuts

By Laura Nahmias – City Hall

Western New York officials are not waiting for the Medicaid Redesign Taskforce to prescribe some fixes of their own.

A bipartisan group of county officials and state legislators is anticipating the major changes expected out of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's budget, expected to include at least \$2 billion in Medicaid cuts when released next week, and his Medicaid Redesign Taskforce with a piece of legislation that would give individual counties more power in cutting Medicaid costs.

The bill, sponsored by Republican Michael Ranzenhofer in the Senate and Democrat Robin Schimminger in Assembly, petitions the federal government to allow counties to choose which Medicaid services to provide. Some of these—including dental, optometrist services and physical therapy—are optional under federal law, but require a waiver that allows the state to give counties the ability to opt out.

Erie County Executive Chris Collins said his doubts about Albany's ability to solve the state's Medicaid problem convinced him he could not wait for the governor's budget or the task force. Collins has made himself into the top spokesman for the measure, arguing that counties like his need to be empowered.

"What I'm doing is being proactive in bringing this forward now," Collins said. "I don't want to wake up the day after his budget is announced, and not see something like this in there."

Collins estimated that allowing counties to choose the services would save his own Erie County about 40 percent of its annual \$1.4 billion total expenditure on Medicaid. Erie County spends 96 percent of its property tax levy, some \$212 million, on its portion of Medicaid funding each year, he said.

The bill is an early example of the intense debate that is expected as the state's \$50 billion Medicaid budget is rethought over the coming months.

Razenhofer said the bipartisan support for the bill makes him optimistic about its chances.

“I think it can pass,” he said. “But one of the things I learned in my short time here was not to predict what can and what cannot pass.”

Health industry leaders say the proposal is premature.

“We don’t think it’s an idea that’s going to get much traction,” said a representative for the United Hospital Fund’s Medicaid Institute.

Members of the governor’s Medicaid Redesign Taskforce, though, were split.

Dick Gottfried, who serves on the taskforce and as the Assembly Health Committee chair, said the legislation was misguided.

“I would say that I very strongly oppose this,” said Gottfried, a member of the taskforce. “I don’t think that people on Medicaid should be deprived of glasses or dental care, because they’re unlucky enough to live in a county that chose to cut those services out.”

He added, “Governor Cuomo has wisely said that the goal of the Medicaid Redesign Task Force is to control Medicaid costs without reducing quality and accessibility of care.”

But Stephen Acquario, director of the New York State Association of Counties who also sits on the governor’s taskforce, said the 27-member team is considering Collins’ suggestion, among other possible ways to trim the budget.

“Those are the kinds of ideas we need to hear. He’s provoking thoughtful dialogue on how to change mandates by county,” Acquario said. “The Medicaid program is unsustainable, it consumes every penny of Erie County’s property tax, and that’s wrong. We are experiencing a high level of frustration and anger from county leaders, over the high amount of property taxes required to pay for one program.”

Cuomo’s office did not respond to a request for comment.