

Why Medicaid expansion will grow North Carolina's economy



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North Carolina increasingly leans on tourism and hospitality to boost its economy, but many hardworking folks in this key industry have no insurance to lean on. Even as they serve up quality meals and make restaurants and vacation resorts run smoothly for eager guests, they know that if they get sick or hurt, they will be on their own, perhaps unable to make ends meet.

The story is the same across other industries that we all know and depend on. From certain front-line health workers to retail, to our many small businesses, thousands of North Carolinians put in a hard day's work without access to health care when they are sick. They make too much to qualify for existing support programs, but not enough to afford insurance on the private market.

This is what we call the health care coverage gap, and it has long been an unnecessary drain on our otherwise robust state economy. Fortunately, we are closer than ever to closing the coverage gap by expanding Medicaid – as 39 other red, blue, and purple states already have.

Expanding Medicaid would have a positive impact on our state's economy. In addition to creating thousands of new jobs in the health care sector, it would also generate significant economic growth. A recent study found that expanding Medicaid in North Carolina would result in a net gain of \$3.9 billion over the next decade, as the increased federal funding and economic activity more than offsets the state's cost of expansion. This money could be used to fund critical public services, such as education and infrastructure, or to provide tax relief to struggling families.

As a longtime business leader in North Carolina and as chair of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), I also cannot emphasize enough the importance of a healthy workforce. Better worker health yields direct benefits to employers. According to some corporate studies, unhealthy workers had absenteeism rates nine times that of healthy workers. Plus, I know from experience that companies thinking about locating or expanding to North Carolina want and desperately need a strong talent pool to pull from.

I respect the way our legislative leaders have dealt with economic issues and opportunities in North Carolina. We are competing hard, chalking up wins, and putting money away for inevitable downturns. It is time for our legislative leaders to embrace this issue to expand Medicaid for our hardworking citizens who need it. It reminds me of a conversation I had while representing Richmond County in the General Assembly and driving between Rockingham and Raleigh. At a convenience store, I struck up a conversation with the friendly and efficient clerk.

She confided that she was uninsured. The cost of health care coverage was just too expensive on her clerk's salary. Clearly, the situation made her uneasy.

I have thought about that conversation as the debate over Medicaid expansion in this state has continued. I hope her lack of coverage did not lead her to skip preventive health visits. I hope she did not come down with a debilitating ailment that she was unable to seek treatment for. I pray she is well and if she still lacks coverage, will find her way out of the gap once North Carolina expands Medicaid.