

## Other Viewpoints

### Medicaid expansion could be a lifesaver

Gov. Sam Brownback and the GOP-led Legislature should not let the Affordable Care Act's problems keep them from doing right by the low-income families and Kansas hospitals for whom Medicaid expansion could be a lifesaver.

The state's conservative leaders need to listen to the Kansas Medicaid Access Coalition, which isn't taking the 2013 Legislature's "no" on expansion for an answer.

"We will be more aggressive," Bruce Witt, director of governmental relations with Via Christi Health, told fellow coalition members last week, according to the *Topeka Capital-Journal*. "We believe expanding coverage to an additional 100,000-plus Kansans who are low-income fits ... our mission."

The Affordable Care Act's launch could hardly be worse, exemplified by the humiliating moment last week in Miami when Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius witnessed the HealthCare.gov website crash as an Affordable Care "navigator" was helping a woman sign up for insurance. Then there was President Obama's flip-flop on canceled plans, which only postponed pain for policyholders while further burdening insurers. The low enrollment numbers and technical missteps have emboldened the critics of "Obamacare," fueling arguments in Kansas for staying as far away as possible from Medicaid expansion and anything else related to the law.

But by neglecting to be among the roughly half of states expanding Medicaid under the act as of 2014 to cover those whose income is 138 percent of the federal poverty level, Kansas is sitting out the first of three years when the federal government will pick up the expansion cost. That's dumb - Kansas subsidizing other states while letting thousands of its own remain not only uninsured but uninsurable under the act.

That's because nearly 88,000 Kansans who lack insurance, including 29,000 children, are not eligible either for Medicaid coverage under Kansas' tightfisted rules or for the new Affordable Care subsidies for private insurance through the online marketplace. Among 5 million in a coverage gap nationwide, they earn both too much and too little to access insurance.

Meanwhile, many hospitals and community health centers in Kansas face the phaseout of federal funding that helps with uncompensated care. Covering more Kansans via Medicaid means helping providers cover their costs, while benefiting the state with an estimated \$3 billion and 4,000 new jobs by 2020.

Brownback should follow the lead of eight other GOP governors who expanded Medicaid. "For me, it was an easy decision," Ohio Gov. John Kasich told the *Wall Street Journal* last week. "It's going to save lives, it's going to help people, and you tell me what's more important than that."

To her credit, Senate President Susan Wagle, R-Wichita, has expressed a willingness to keep the state's options open on Medicaid, showing interest in the "Arkansas model" of using expansion funds to help people buy private insurance.

Wagle is a skilled lawmaker and a persuasive conservative voice who has said going through her family's health crises gave her a "soft spot for doing what we can with our health care to provide the best quality care for people in need." She is in a prime position to lead a Medicaid expansion push.

Continuing to deny Medicaid expansion may hold a misguided political appeal, but it will do a grave and shameful disservice to Kansans and Kansas hospitals.

- *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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WHEN IT ALL BEGAN...

## Marginalized counties need strong voice

Rep. Ward Cassidy told members of the Oberlin Rotary Club last Tuesday that he wants to hold on to his legislative positions, if only so he can continue to stick up for western Kansas.

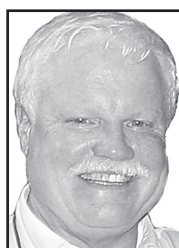
The St. Francis Republican is a member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, vice chair of the Education Committee and chairman of Education Finance. These jobs give him more clout when his district, or western Kansas as a whole, needs something, but the reality is, he can't hold them if he gets crosswise with the leadership.

Cassidy recalled that when he joined Appropriations - the committee which sets budgets for all state agencies - the farthest-west member was from Riley County, near Manhattan. But then, he said, western Kansas only has six members in the House, while Johnson County in the Kansas City area alone has 26.

That's just one sign of how far our area's influence has sunk over the past 50 years since the Supreme Court ordered Kansas to apportion seats in the House according to population. Before that "one man-one vote" case, each county had one representative (with 20 allocated to larger counties), and the west predominated.

As the population here shrinks and that in the east grows, Mr. Cassidy said, the representatives out here have been marginalized. Lobbyists have a lot of power in the Legislature because of the money many can raise for campaigns, but western Kansas representatives don't see much of that.

Some lobbyists can blow things out of proportion with their vote reporting, however. Cassidy, who hunts and has a concealed-carry



**Steve Haynes**

### • Along the Sappa

license, said he got a "D" rating from the National Rifle Association after speaking up - in a caucus, with no vote involved - for college presidents, who worried about allowing handguns at sporting events.

"I'll bet no one in the House of Representatives has shot more things than I have," he added.

Of the six western representatives, he added, some seem to be just trying to fit in to the city-dominated House rather than to represent this area. He recounted some of the things he's done to ensure he can get a hearing for people with state agencies.

As a member of Appropriations, he noted, he heard from 96 or 97 state agencies, and he's been to the offices of nearly all of them (starting with the governor), met the staffs and left his card so if he has to call about something, they know who he is.

And, he notes, the governor has told his department heads that when a legislator calls, the problem needs to be resolved within two days. You have to wonder why any citizen can't get the same kind of service, however.

Cassidy said he made a decision not to join any of the issue or ideological groups in Topeka, but just to represent this area.

"I just wanted to fight for western Kansas,"

he said. "I'm playing this game all the time, and politics is a game."

The next big issue, he said, may be how the Legislature responds to a Supreme Court decision on school finance. Based on a District Court decision which the state appealed, he said, the high court could order the House and Senate to come up with \$400 million to \$600 million more for schools, money that - with the governor's cuts in income taxes - would be hard to come by.

While the Legislature thinks it has the power to set spending levels, the courts might order the state to close its schools if the money isn't found.

"The governor is working diligently with a lot of groups (to find a solution)," Cassidy said, "but the lawsuit will dictate the next election and maybe the entire history of Kansas politics (from here out)."

He noted that Appropriations Chairman Marc Rhoades of Newton has opposition from a more liberal candidate, a former president of the Kansas Association of School Boards, one of the groups least happy with Gov. Brownback's tax and spending cuts. The governor himself is under fire from many groups affected by the cuts, from welfare advocates to some school leaders.

All House members have to run for election every two years, so things could change. But for him, Cassidy said, it's all about keeping his jobs so he can do more for his district and this area.

*Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.*

## Long-range vision needed for water

Looking back through history, some generations have become known for key achievements, traits and ideals. Stereotypes are broadly applied across the United States but what about us? What will this generation of Kansans be remembered for?

It could be for putting personal politics and differences aside, rolling up our sleeves and working together to ensure future generations of Kansans have a reliable source of water to fuel our state's economy.

In calling for the development of a 50-Year Vision for the Future of Water in Kansas, Gov. Sam Brownback put it best when he said, "Water and the Kansas economy are directly linked. Water is a finite resource and without further planning and action, we will no longer be able to meet our state's current needs, let alone growth."

He's right. The writing is on the wall and if we don't act today, our future is bleak.

The Ogallala Aquifer is declining faster than it is recharging. Reservoirs, which are critical water storage structures for much of our state, are filling with sediment. At this rate, with no changes in the next 50 years, the Ogallala will



### Free Press Letter Drop

• Our readers sound off

be 70 percent depleted and our reservoirs will be 40 percent filled with mud.

The drought over the past three years has brought water issues to the forefront; we must plan for the future now.

That is what the Kansas Water Office, Kansas Department of Agriculture and Kansas Water Authority are doing. A Visioning Team has been established and is embarking on a one-year mission to seek input from water users, compile data, conduct research and chart a path forward.

It will not be easy. Some believe it's too late to save the Ogallala. There are differing ideas about how to better manage reservoirs and surface water.

We need to develop plans to ensure a reliable water supply for all Kansans, improve water quality, reduce our vulnerability to extreme events, like floods and drought, develop and maintain water infrastructure and improve recreational opportunities available to our citizens.

We need your help and advice in this process. Give us your feedback and ideas during town-hall meetings and other events. Be a part of the solution.

If we are successful, future generations will look back on the work we do this year and say that's the generation of Kansans who worked together to protect and conserve the state's water resources today and for the future.

To submit your comments or get more information about the Governor's Call to Action 50-Year Vision, go to [www.kwo.org](http://www.kwo.org).

*The 50-Year Water Visioning Team*  
Katie Patterson-Ingels,  
Kansas Water Office  
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Kansas Department of Agriculture

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The *Colby Free Press* encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise. Nor do we run form letters or letters about

topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses not pertaining to a public issue.

### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

