

Vote yes on Measure 101 for all Oregonians

First do no harm. That's a centuries-old tenet when it comes to health care. It's worth keeping in mind when it comes to Measure 101, which asks voters to ensure coverage for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians, or let the bottom drop out and hope for something better.

Measure 101 is the Republican response to the Democrat-supported HB 2391. That bill was approved by the Oregon State Legislature and signed by Gov. Kate Brown last year. Among other things, it established temporary assessments on insurance companies, some

hospitals, managed care organizations and the benefit plan for public employees. The assessments – or taxes – are part of the package to continue funding Oregon's

Medicaid expansion in the Affordable Care Act – approximately 350,000 Oregonians. Some of the funding is earmarked to stabilize insurance premiums for individuals and families.

Three Republican lawmakers circulated a petition that garnered enough signatures to send the assessments to the ballot for a special Jan. 23 election.

Opponents of the measure say the cost will simply be passed on to consumers, and that is a valid concern. Insurance companies are allowed to increase premium rates up to 1.5 percent as a result of the assessments. But if Measure 101 fails, consumers will also bear the burden of a \$500 million gap in the state's Medicaid program. And when matching federal funds are factored in, we're looking at an estimated \$1.3 billion negative impact in the 2017-19 budget. That's a lot of money – and lives – on the table.

No piece of legislation is perfect, particularly ones that involve taxes and health care entitlements – and if you're skeptical of how both are managed, you'll agree that Measure 101 has its imperfections.

The entire system is broken and needs an overhaul, say opponents, who believe stopping this tax and thwarting this form of Medicaid funding will trigger better ideas for cost savings. Maybe they're right, and who can argue against fostering better and brighter ideas from Salem? But at what cost?

Rep. Julie Parrish, a chief petitioner on the

measure and opponent of the tax, has likened the process to re-breaking a bone that has mended badly in order for it to heal properly.

But we're not talking about just incentivizing political process here, or even mending broken bones for that matter. We're talking lives – lives that are threadbare to begin with, that have no safety net to weather a political storm.

Opponents say that they do not intend to let anyone lose Medicaid coverage if the measure fails, but they've failed to offer such a guarantee – because they can't. No one can. If this measure fails and the assessments are repealed, the state is under no obligation to pay for the Medicaid coverage for the 350,000 people who joined as part of the expansion.

We're in a period when the health care of the most vulnerable Oregonians is in the crosshairs of a federal government bent not only on undoing the Affordable Care Act, but carving up Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security. Approximately 1 out of 4 Oregonians rely on the Oregon Health Plan, the state's Medicaid provider. The greatest numbers of OHP recipients are in the state's most rural counties. Among youths, 42 percent of Oregonians under the age of 9 are insured by OHP.

For every dollar spent on health care, there are immeasurable savings in avoiding more costly consequences down the line.

These are frightening times for anyone who relies on that assistance and is struggling to stay housed, has a child with special needs, lives with their own disability or is simply in need during a rough patch in life.

We witness those rough patches every day at Street Roots. It is eye-opening to see how fragile our friends and neighbors are.

"I had a heart attack six months ago," said Street Roots vendor Michelle Hamberg, pictured below. "I had heart surgery, and without (the) Oregon Health Plan, I would've been gone."

"OHSU and Medicaid helped me get sober on July 13, 2012," said vendor Ron Sanford. "I was homeless and a chronic alcoholic at the end of my rope. It literally saved my life."

Life turned around for Bettyjo Griffiths after she qualified for Medicaid two years ago. She had gone years without health care prior to signing up in the expansion.

"Before I got my dentures people wouldn't even look at me or even give me a job. They wouldn't take me seriously. Now I have a beautiful smile, I'm confident, which makes me more approachable because I don't have to hide the fact I don't have teeth. If you don't look together, no one will take you seriously. It changed everything. I started getting jobs here and there. People were willing to come talk to me. Having health care has made a huge difference in my life."

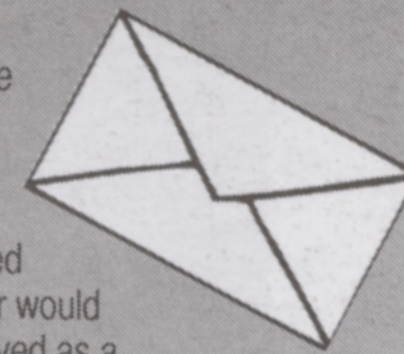
These are not pawns in the decades-long partisan argument about fiscal conservatism versus tax-and-spend policies. These are entire communities that benefited greatly by the Medicaid expansion and now rely on the coverage for greater stability. These are workers who have seen their wages lie dormant while the cost of health care, food and housing are now barely within reach. Meanwhile, efforts to raise revenues to fund low-income housing – including ending the mortgage interest deduction for second homes, raising the transient hotel tax, and allowing for local real estate transfer fees – were kicked to the legislative curb. It's easy to see how the opposition's promises to find the money elsewhere feel empty.

Street Roots has endorsed Measure 101 because we know the people hanging in the balance. Hundreds of other organizations, including hospitals and labor unions, have endorsed it as well.

To do no harm, Measure 101 needs to pass. Still, we support future efforts in Salem to do better, to eliminate careless spending and to find that interconnectivity on issues, challenges, opportunities and solutions that are critical to so many vulnerable Oregonians.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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EDITORIAL

