

Alabama must improve access to basic health care

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There are no pleasant surprises in the Alabama Department of Public Health's first Community Health Assessment.

The report highlights the depressingly familiar list of health problems afflicting the state's regions and residents, identified through surveys of consumers, hundreds of health care and other organizations, large employers, nonprofits and special interest groups.

The greatest problem singled out is lack of access to basic health care. Too few Alabamians have medical insurance. Too few can afford treatments. Too few can get to doctors' offices because they lack transportation, and too few primary care physicians are available in some counties.

Those massive, even catastrophic, problems don't admit of quick solutions.

But why not start with the elephant in the room: State leaders' shameless refusal to look seriously at ways to expand Medicaid coverage to more working poor under the Affordable Care Act.

Other red states have worked with federal officials to fashion block-grant programs or other means of accepting the ACA funding to get their residents insured.

And save their lives. A White House study released this month projects expansion of Medicaid in Alabama in 2016 would prevent 210 deaths that would otherwise result from lack of health care.

Mortality rates are indeed dropping in states that embraced the expansion, making Alabama's refusal to do so morally reprehensible.

The second greatest health concern in Alabama, according to the ADPH assessment, is mental health care, including substance abuse. Again, the state has a severe shortage of mental health providers, particularly in rural areas. Suicide and drug-related mortality numbers have increased in recent years.

Alabama's prisons are stuffed with inmates with substance-abuse issues who get next to nothing in terms of programs to help them kick the habit and stay out of trouble after release.

Yet the state Legislature, under a no-new-revenues budget vetoed by Gov. Robert Bentley, would slash funds for corrections and community mental health services.

Other top concerns cited include pregnancy outcomes. Alabama has high infant mortality rates, and too many pregnant women lack adequate prenatal care, particularly black and younger mothers.

The list goes on. Child abuse and neglect, sexually transmitted disease rates, access to dental care, obesity -- all are significant problems across the state.

They won't go away on their own and require a strong public health safety net if improvements are to be made.

The dismal report underscores the imperative that state lawmakers find ways to shore up -- not gut -- agencies that provide public health protections when they meet in special session this summer.

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