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Telling stories of struggle, Texans demand health coverage

AUSTIN — “We need health coverage. We deserve to see our families grow up.”

That message — delivered by Tambra Morrison, an advocate from Dallas — was echoed by dozens of parents, business owners, students, workers and other Texans from cities and towns across the state who converged on the Capitol Thursday.

They spoke at the People’s Hearing for Medicaid Expansion, which was convened by a coalition of nonprofit groups to demonstrate — in graphically human terms — the need for greater health coverage in Texas.

The event — held in a packed, standing-room-only hearing room in the Capitol Extension — also highlighted the Texas Legislature’s refusal last session to even hold a hearing on Medicaid expansion, which is the easiest and most cost-efficient way to expand coverage in Texas.

“Medicaid Expansion is the most powerful and effective tool we have to provide our citizens with access to healthcare, to improve public health, to stabilize family finances, to lower private insurance costs, to increase productivity, and create high-paying jobs, all without a new tax,” said state Sen. Nathan Johnson in testimony prepared for the People’s Hearing. “Texans have a choice: do we want people to live healthy, independent and productive lives — or not?”

Texas leads the nation in the number and percentage of people without health insurance. The state’s refusal to expand Medicaid has especially endangered rural communities, which have been devastated by hospital and clinic closures.

Yet despite these dangers — and [Texans’ overwhelming support](#) — legislative leaders refused to hold a hearing on Medicaid expansion in 2021, and they may refuse again this year.

In response, #SickOfItTX — a campaign that includes [Children’s Defense Fund–Texas](#), [Every Texan](#), [The Afiya Center](#), [Texas Organizing Project](#) and [Young Invincibles](#) — convened the People’s Hearing to put

human faces on the issue and give Texans an opportunity to share the struggles they face when they and their family members cannot get affordable health coverage.

Meridith McGee, a small business owner and hairdresser from Lewisville, lost her affordable Healthcare.Gov plan due to a technicality when she took in her sister and nephew. Her income is now too *low* to qualify for Healthcare.Gov subsidies, and she cannot get Medicaid coverage because Texas won't expand the program.

"To keep my psychiatrist, the treatments for major depressive disorder and my search for a therapist, I pay out-of-pocket for my \$550 (per month) policy, plus copays and coinsurance," McGee said. "I know, most likely sooner than later, I'll no longer be able to find a way to pay."

Ken Berry, a graduate student from Nacogdoches, managed her heart condition through Medicaid as a child. Shortly after turning 19, when Children's Medicaid ends, Berry had a medical emergency tied to her heart condition.

"I discovered that I was kicked off of Medicaid, and responsible for an \$8,000 hospital bill," she testified.

Glenda Day, a librarian from Clarendon, said she can only work part-time due to her epilepsy. She has tried for 10 years to apply for disability coverage in Medicaid — she testified that she now believes "my disability is not 'bad enough' for the judges." She also testified that her struggle to get health coverage took such a toll on her mental health that she nearly died.

"I am left with no option but just try and make it day-by-day," she said in her testimony, which was read by someone on her behalf because Day could not provide it in-person. "Living with epilepsy after all these years has caused me to be very depressed and anxious. It touches all parts of my life, and at one point I could not handle it. I attempted suicide because I was so stressed out financially."

State Reps. Julie Johnson and John H. Bucy III also testified during the hearing.

"Texas has consistently ranked at the bottom for health insurance coverage in the nation for adults and children," Rep. Johnson said. "Now is the time to pass Medicaid Expansion and provide approximately 1.4 million Texans with affordable, quality health insurance."

Rep. Bucy added: "Medicaid expansion is the biggest tool in the toolbox to help Texans access healthcare. We cannot adequately address critical issues like mental health, maternal mortality and rural hospital closure without it. It's time to bring our tax dollars home to Texas to help those in need."

Sitting in the place of legislative committee members were community leaders from across the state — including former Texas Medical Association president Dr. Doug Curran and former Austin City Council member Ora Houston — who asked questions of speakers and emphasized the need to expand Medicaid in Texas.

As speakers made clear, health insurance is a matter of life or death for millions of Texans. By failing to expand Medicaid, Texas leaders are forcing hardworking Texans to patch together their own health care, rely on home remedies, and hope for the best — for themselves and their families.

“If my son gets sick, he's covered, but I'm not,” said Breanna Boyd, a mother and student from Houston.
“If something were to happen to me, nobody's going to take care of him like mom does.”

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