

Concerned Citizens, organizations launch 'Coalition for a Strong Tennessee' to keep healthcare taxes in Tennessee

A group of bi-partisan, concerned citizens and organizations have teamed to launch the 'Coalition for a Strong Tennessee,' a statewide effort to draw public attention to the dire need to expand Medicaid, and to make the issue a top priority in the 2019 legislative session. Currently, \$7 billion in Tennessee tax dollars earmarked for expansion is being sent to other states, while approximately 300,000 eligible Tennesseans are living without healthcare benefits.

The coalition announced a new website BringOurTaxesHome.org as well as a statewide billboard campaign that draws attention to the billions of federal tax dollars Tennesseans are currently paying to fund healthcare in states that have voted to expand Medicaid.

The billboards feature sports fans wearing the colors of state universities of two neighboring states that have expanded Medicaid (Kentucky and Arkansas) and include thank you notes to Tennessee taxpayers for helping to fund their state's healthcare. If Tennessee voted to expand Medicaid, those tax dollars would be spent to fund healthcare for Tennesseans, instead of for residents of other states.

Campaign billboards are prominently placed in Tennessee's major cities, including Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, Jackson and the Tri- Cities area. Cumulatively, the coalition of organizers estimates Tennesseans will see the billboards one million times per week statewide.

"Surely one thing all of us can agree on regardless of political affiliation is that Tennessee should take care of our residents first," said coalition co-founder Sally Smallwood. "For candidates who are running for state and federal office, this issue is critical to the health of our citizens. It is unconscionable that because we have not expanded coverage, our tax dollars are going to help the residents of other states while Tennesseans go without. Our hope is that we can compel voters to engage candidates to move this issue to the front of the agenda."

The Coalition for a Strong Tennessee includes individuals and organizations across the state who support Medicaid expansion, including: Nashville Cares, YWCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, and March of Dimes, Tennessee Chapter.

Those interested in participating in the effort can find more information and join the coalition by visiting BringOurTaxesHome.org

To date, 33 states and the District of Columbia have voted for some form of Medicaid expansion. In 2014, Republican Gov. Bill Haslam's conservative Insure Tennessee plan failed in the legislature despite the support of more than 65% of all Tennesseans. Had

the measure passed, Tennessee would have received an estimated \$7 billion in federal taxes to date to fund the program, taxes Tennesseans are paying regardless to help fund other states' programs.

"I do not believe that any taxpayer in Tennessee thinks we should be sending our own tax dollars to care for people in other states," said Scott Morris, CEO Church Health in Memphis. "It makes no economic sense. That money, pure and simple, should go to provide care for hard working Tennesseans."

"So many of our patients struggle with medical debt and are condemned to bankruptcy and economic ruin because they don't have and cannot afford medical insurance," added Brian Haile, executive director of Neighborhood Health in Nashville.

"Yet, their taxes are providing healthcare to patients in California and Massachusetts that have expanded Medicaid. How is that right?"

The coalition includes Tennessee healthcare professionals, like St. Thomas Health's Dr. Robert Hutton, who sees the impacts of not expanding Medicaid firsthand. "As an Emergency physician I see some of the 300,000 uninsured Tennesseans every day," said Dr. Hutton. "Many have illness made worse by delaying basic preventive care that they cannot afford and end up in the ER. Many end up in the hospital for treatment of complications of preventable illness. I believe as society that we can do better. By providing basic care to our neediest neighbors we can lower both the total financial cost and improve the overall health of our community."

The coalition also emphasizes the important role Medicaid expansion would have on Tennessee's economy, especially in rural communities.

The federal taxes currently being routed to other states would provide a vital lifeline to Tennessee's rural hospitals, which are closing at an alarming rate. Aside from the care they provide, hospitals are often a top employer for rural communities, and are an essential asset in attracting new businesses and industry to the state's outlying counties. "Tennessee's economy and healthcare for its citizens are inextricably tied to each other," said coalition co-founder Mary Falls.

"To be economically strong, Tennessee must have a healthy workforce. And to have a healthy workforce, all Tennesseans must have access to quality, affordable healthcare coverage. Most other states in our country, both conservative and liberal, have found ways to expand Medicaid and bring their tax dollars home. Now it's time for Tennessee. Bring our taxes home!"

'Coalition for a Strong Tennessee,' is behind a series of billboards that have gone up across the state featuring sports fans wearing the colors of state universities of two neighboring states that have expanded Medicaid (Kentucky and Arkansas) and include thank you notes to Tennessee taxpayers for helping to fund their state's healthcare.