

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee's proposed Medicaid block grant will do nothing but harm Memphians | Opinion

Steve Cohen, Guest Columnist

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The Tennessee Governor's proposed block grant could potentially take away TennCare funds from over 250,000 Memphians.

Lack of guidance by block grant reflects lack of awareness.

As Governor Lee works on his proposal to dismantle TennCare, I remain gravely concerned about what this could mean for Memphians and residents of the Ninth District. Thousands in our community depend on TennCare to survive, and Governor Lee's priorities have been focused on rural counties rather than cities like Memphis. I have fought tirelessly to expand access to affordable health care, and I believe this block grant would do nothing but harm Memphians.

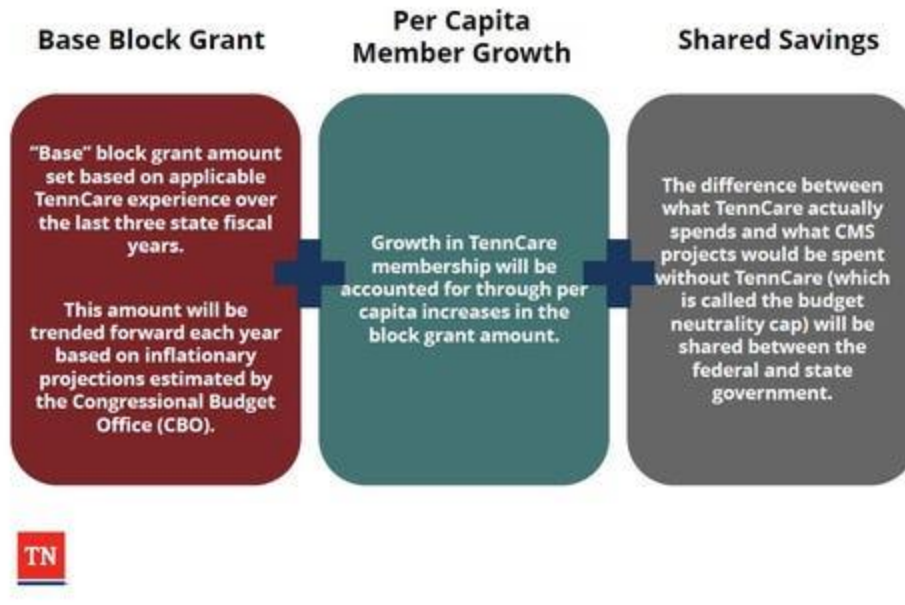
A block grant not only entails less funding, but also includes less federal oversight. This would allow Governor Lee to redirect TennCare funds away from the 250,000 Memphians receiving services through TennCare.

Currently, federal funding increases and decreases based on the state's need, and Tennessee receives approximately \$7.5 billion to fund TennCare's Medicaid programs. The three page block grant bill admits that officials have no idea how a block grant would affect us, our economy or future federal funding.

It ignores the maternal mortality crisis that kills black women at four times the rate of white women. It does not include an exception of flexible funding for public health crises like the opioid epidemic. It's unlikely to stem rural hospital closures.

To pay for a block grant's shortcomings, Senator Paul Bailey (R-Sparta) has proposed making TennCare recipients -- mostly low-income households, pregnant women, children, seniors and people with disabilities -- pay more.

Tennessee Block Grant Framework



A screen shot from a document provided by the governor's office explains how Tennessee' Medicaid block grant proposal is expected to work. (Photo: Kelman, Brett M)

Despite knowing nothing outside of the proposal's potential harm, Republican state legislators claim it would be of great benefit. This proposal willfully ignores a solution that has already been successfully implemented in thirty-six states and in Indiana by then-governor Mike Pence.

Medicaid expansion has been tried, and it benefits communities based on need, not on who resides in or represents a county. States that have expanded Medicaid have insured more people and are projected to see net budget savings.

This is the wrong time for block grant

At a time when there is overwhelming evidence of the disproportionate need in Memphis, we should not be limiting access to care. Block grants are designed to limit federal oversight and define eligibility in ways that neither expand nor improve health care.

Tennessee should be looking to the examples set by our neighbors that have expanded Medicaid and wholly reject this block grant proposal. The health of Tennesseans depend on it. Should this proposal move forward, Memphians will shoulder the burden and Shelby County taxpayers will pay more to receive less.

Congressman Cohen represents Tennessee's 9th Congressional District.

