



Date: March 2024

Oral Testimony in Support of Medicaid Expansion

I am Erica Christie, Assistant Director for 3Rivers, Center for Independent Living serving 12 counties in Northeast Kansas. I am an Army combat veteran with over 20 years of experience working with people with disabilities.

We have a gap, a hole, a void. I am asking for your support for Medicaid Expansion to fill this space. Expanding Medicaid in Kansas will significantly increase access to health insurance for working people with disabilities. It will also provide a safety net for people who wish to work more but fear losing their Medicaid.

3Rivers is proud of our work assisting people with disabilities to gain employment, however, we are finding there is a large gap between those who qualify for Medicaid or can afford private health insurance and those who have neither.

Most of the individuals I work with who would be affected by the expansion are working people with lower incomes. As we navigate the employment process with them, we find that an increase in earnings or savings results in a loss of Medicaid coverage. That is a no win and scary situation for someone with a disability. It is also an impossible situation for my staff who encourage people to go to work but may have to caution them on the income limits for continued Medicaid coverage. Expanding Medicaid will allow our consumers to work more, get stronger, and work towards the goal of getting employer provided healthcare.

I've seen firsthand the dilemma people face who've experienced a disability through an adult-onset disease or a severe accident. They are desperate to return to the workforce but anxious about whether their health will allow it. Expanding Medicaid will mean they can get healthcare and a job as they navigate their way back into the workforce.

Decades ago, Centers for Independent Living or "CILs" embraced the opportunity to provide services under the newly developed Medicaid Home and Community Based Services program or "HCBS" which allows individuals with significant disabilities to receive services to remain in their homes. CILs also saw this as an opportunity for some individuals with disabilities to be trained as caregivers. Today, many of the individuals employed as caregivers or direct service workers in this program are people with some type of disability.

3Rivers provides payroll services for hundreds of consumers with developmental and physical disabilities who employ direct service workers. Expanding Medicaid would help us increase our ability to recruit workers for crucial services for people with Intellectual and Developmental disabilities and seniors. The success of the Medicaid waivers in part depends on the quality of workers available. In this case, as with any self-direct program, more is better. This would be the perfect work for these individuals - except for the lack of access to healthcare.

Kansas chose to set up the Self-Directed HCBS program as this model benefits the State and allows the consumer to maximize their ability to self-direct their care. But it leaves the workers with zero access to benefits. In a survey of direct service workers, lack of health insurance was the second highest reason listed for why a worker would likely leave employment in the near future; second only to wages.

Kansas has a long history of supporting individuals with disabilities, and seniors to remain in their home with supports through programs like HCBS. We also have a philosophy of self-reliance and strong work ethics. I am asking for your support in maintaining both by creating a pathway for our consumers and direct service workers to gain access to healthcare. Medicaid Expansion is the pathway that fills the gap.

Help us keep working Kansans healthier and support our direct service workers – a workforce necessary to keep seniors and individuals with Intellectual and Developmental disabilities, independent in their own home and community.

Thank you,

Erica Christie, MBA, MSS  
Assistant Director