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Walden should tell Congress to follow Oregon on health care

by Dr. Nathan Boddie

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The Affordable Care Act has made great strides to ensure my patients and all Oregonians get the health care they need. Yet, much of the progress could unravel if Republican congressional leaders in Washington, D.C. — who don't know our state — push forward with their plans. Congressman Greg Walden can prevent that crisis as a leader of the committee that oversees health policy. We need him to listen to us.

Most Oregonians living east of the Cascades — more than 92 percent of them — now have health insurance compared to 83 percent insured just three years ago. The 85,000 Oregonians in the region who recently gained coverage can now get preventive care and more easily see a doctor when they get sick. Not only that, but it's good for local business and the economy when we have a healthy workforce, and Oregonians no longer need to fear medical bankruptcy.

Nearly all Oregon children in the eastern region also are insured, with the majority of them covered by Oregon's Medicaid program, the Oregon Health Plan. That is good news because growing up with health insurance has long-term benefits. Insured children do better in school, become healthier adults and end up earning more.

However, our health security is now in peril. Plans proposed last week in Congress call for radically altering Medicaid's financing structure. For the past 50 years, when a state's Medicaid program pays for someone to see a doctor, the federal government has contributed toward the cost. In Oregon's case, the feds now pay about 75 percent, while Oregon pays the remaining 25 percent. If someone gets very sick and the treatment is expensive, the federal government still pays its 75 percent. This shared responsibility model has helped Oregon and other states protect the health of residents during good times and bad.

Congressional plans to cut Medicaid would sever this funding partnership and shift costs to states and to Oregonians. Instead of sharing responsibility, the idea is to give states a fixed allotment for each person covered or a lump sum called a block grant, regardless of what health issues people are facing or the cost of the treatment. Under these wrong-headed scenarios, Oregon would get less money, forcing Oregon taxpayers to cover more of the costs. And if more people get seriously ill, we would have to shoulder the additional costs on our own.

Bend, Central and Eastern Oregon would be particularly hard hit, with 228,000 residents covered by the Oregon Health Plan. The 21 hospitals in our region would also suffer, making it harder for people to get health care and cause job losses. Why would Congress want to punish some of our largest employers? The fact is, since more people have had health insurance, uncompensated care costs for our hospitals in the area have plummeted. That's healthy for our economy. Let's keep that going.

Instead of cutting health care funding with a blunt instrument that harms patients, Congress should make health care more efficient by following Oregon's example. Oregon is already lowering Medicaid costs by preventing diseases in the first place. We started the coordinated

care approach in 2011 and saved taxpayers hundreds of millions by keeping people healthier and out of emergency rooms. Changes to health care should increase coverage, because it helps people stay healthy, not reverse the gains we've made so far.

Walden works for us, not the other way around. Oregonians need him to lead, to stand against misinformed proposals to cut our health care. The congressman needs to show his colleagues in D.C. how we do things in Oregon.

— Dr. Nathan Boddie is a primary care physician and Bend city councilor.