

Medicaid program helped Will Weatherford's family after all, he admits

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TALLAHASSEE — Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford reversed course on Wednesday and said that health care provided for his brother was covered under Florida's Medically Needy program, which is financed by Medicaid.

So ends a mystery that developed a day earlier when Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, voiced opposition to expanding Medicaid in his opening day speech of the 2013 legislative session.

During his remarks, Weatherford said despite his opposition to expansion, he supports a strong safety net, like the one that helped his family afford the medical care for his brother Peter, who died of brain cancer as an infant. Moved House colleagues gave Weatherford a standing ovation.

But what exactly was the safety net? Weatherford didn't say in the speech. Asked by reporters later if it was Medicaid, Weatherford said no.

When told that his father, when reached by the *Times/Herald*, said it had to have been Medicaid that covered more than \$100,000 in expenses, Weatherford said his dad misspoke and that it was probably something else. Still, Weatherford said he would check to find out what paid the bills.

Late Wednesday, after his father maintained it was Medicaid and his mother said she didn't know, Weatherford announced it was the Medically Needy program. The program helps needy patients whose incomes are too high to qualify for regular Medicaid. Depending on their income, these patients owe a certain amount of money before Medicaid kicks in — kind of like a deductible.

"It is not surprising that recollections would be cloudy surrounding a time of great sorrow and difficulty," said Weatherford, who was 15 when his brother died in 1995. "Now that the safety net that benefited my family has been clearly identified, I trust that the debate can return to the important question of Medicaid expansion and its impact on the economic and personal freedom of Floridians."



But the anecdote may linger and color floor debates in the House, which under Weatherford's leadership, has already refused to follow Gov. Rick Scott's lead and take up a bill that would expand Medicaid to 900,000 or more poor Floridians.

Unlike Scott, who used his own personal anecdote to justify his sudden support of the expansion, Weatherford maintains that his family's experience in getting help from Medicaid is irrelevant to the larger debate of expanding the program to additional families.

"Expanding Medicaid will not extend coverage to a single low-income child under 18 in Florida because they are already covered," Weatherford said in Wednesday's statement.

Though Weatherford notes, correctly, that the Medicaid expansion would not add new children to the rolls, it might help their parents.

Under current law, a single mother in a family of three would have to make less than \$9,672 to qualify for Medicaid coverage. Under the expansion, the same mother could earn up to \$26,344 and qualify.

Leah Barber-Heinz, a spokeswoman for the advocacy group Florida CHAIN, said studies show insured parents take better medical care of their children than those who are uninsured.

"The Medicaid expansion does impact children," she said.

The mistake in how Weatherford explained his family's personal story is a rare misstep for a rapidly rising politician.

At 33, Weatherford is widely regarded as a polished politician with excellent instincts. Next week, he'll speak in Washington at CPAC, the American Conservative Union's annual conference, where he has been touted as a rising star.

Tuesday's speech was supposed to set the table for Weatherford's next two years as speaker. Instead, the majority of the questions focused on the meaning of his anecdote and what it actually said about Medicaid. Weatherford said he originally thought his brother's medical bills were paid through uncompensated care, which is basically when hospitals eat costs.

If true, it would still be a puzzling story to tell as a reason to oppose Medicaid expansion.

Why?

Because ultimately, the government — and taxpayers — pay.

Tony Carvalho, executive director of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, said hospital charity care can be used to seek additional public money.

One thing hospitals might ask for: higher Medicaid reimbursements.

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