

## Will Weatherford's dad says Medicaid helped family

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TALLAHASSEE — In outlining his opposition to expanding Medicaid on Tuesday, Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford told an emotional story about how his family relied on existing safety nets to provide health care for his 13-month-old brother.

"Peter lost his battle with cancer, and my father found himself with a mountain of medical bills that he could never afford to pay," Weatherford told lawmakers on the floor of the House of Representatives. "It was the safety net that picked my father up. It was the safety net that picked my family up."

He left out one detail: the name of the safety net.

According to his father, it was Medicaid.

The federal-state health care program for the poor covered more than \$100,000 in Peter's medical costs, Weatherford's father told the *Times/Herald*.

"There was no way I could pay that," said Bill Weatherford, 62, when reached by phone in Odessa.

The House speaker, asked later, said Medicaid did not help cover his brother's hospital bills and that he thinks his father was mistaken. He said he would look into the matter.

"I don't know the specifics of what happened," said Weatherford, who was 15 when his brother died in 1995. "I know my brother had cancer, I know we were uninsured, and I know they weren't able to pay their bills."

Weatherford, a Republican from Wesley Chapel, mentioned Medicaid in his opening day speech to lawmakers only when speaking abstractly about his opposition to expanding it.

"A government that grows too big, becomes too intrusive, and fosters too much dependency will threaten our liberty, our freedom and our prosperity," Weatherford said. "Members — I am opposed to Medicaid expansion because I believe it crosses the line of the proper role of government."

Weatherford used the personal experience in precisely the opposite manner that Gov. Rick Scott used a similar



anecdote last month and that he repeated Tuesday during his State of the State address. Scott's mother, Esther, could barely afford medical care for his younger brother, which helped persuade him to no longer oppose the expansion of Medicaid.

"As I wrestled with this decision, I thought about my mom and her struggles to get my little brother the care he needed with little money," Scott said Tuesday. "I concluded that for the three years the federal government is committed to paying 100 percent of the cost of new people in Medicaid, I cannot, in good conscience, deny the uninsured access to care."

Under the health care law, the federal government committed to covering 100 percent of the costs to expand Medicaid enrollment through 2016 and at least 90 percent of the costs after that. That's an unprecedented level of support by the federal government, which typically picks up only 58 percent of Medicaid costs in Florida.

In Florida, the expansion could bring in \$26 billion in federal funds over the next decade to cover an estimated 815,000 to 1.3 million residents now uninsured.

That reduction in the uninsured would bring a huge relief to hospitals, which by federal law must treat anyone who comes to an emergency room, regardless of ability to pay. In Tampa Bay alone, hospitals provide \$200 million in uncompensated care a year.

All Children's Hospital, which is where Bill Weatherford said Peter was treated, helps families, many of them privately insured but quickly reaching their cap, apply for Medicaid. Most of the time, they qualify.

All Children's is one of the highest Medicaid providers in the state; more than 70 percent of its patients are on Medicaid.

Bill Weatherford said after he was told that Peter needed a second surgery, he told hospital administrators that he couldn't pay for the first one. He said the hospital had him sign documents that determined he was eligible for Medicaid. He said he doesn't remember seeing a bill or invoice after that, but said he estimates total costs were above \$100,000.

Will Weatherford said he thinks the costs were covered by uncompensated care, a type of medical service that does not get reimbursed.

Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida said rejecting the additional federal funding would make even worse the fact that the state Legislature has slashed Medicaid reimbursements to hospitals by \$1 billion over the past eight years.

Weatherford says the promised federal money isn't free, or without strings attached.

"The notion that we're going to receive free money from the federal government is laughable," he said. "This is the same federal government that has not passed a budget in nearly four years. This is the same federal government that spends \$1.2 trillion more than it takes in every year.

"Florida is being tempted with empty promises to comply with policies we would never pay for if we knew the true cost. They're trying to buy off states one by one. I am not buying it. Florida should not buy it."

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