

It's Time to Expand Medicaid in Kansas: A Storybook



Introduction

Kansas is one of just 10 states where lawmakers have chosen not to expand Medicaid to enroll more of our state's residents. As a result of this decision, thousands of hardworking Kansans have no affordable health insurance options – they make too much to qualify for Medicaid but can't afford to buy private health insurance or coverage offered by their employer. These Kansans are our friends, family, neighbors, and pillars of our communities. It's time we improve access to affordable health coverage and care in Kansas.

A letter from Stephanie Barr, Kansas State Lead Ambassador,
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

I truly believe that without Medicaid, I wouldn't be alive today. In July of 2010, at just 30 years old, I found a lump in my breast – and was subsequently diagnosed with breast cancer. Over the span of a year, I completed eight rounds of chemotherapy, over a month of radiation, and a double mastectomy.

I worked at a small business at the time, and didn't have health insurance. A sense of relief washed over me when I learned I was eligible for Medicaid through Kansas' Early Detection Works program. I was so worried about the financial burden of breast cancer but Medicaid coverage meant I didn't have to stress about how I would afford my treatments.

Thanks to Medicaid, I'm now cancer-free and have no medical debt. I'm running my own small business as well as working part-time, and volunteering with cancer groups here in Kansas. It feels good dedicating my time to connect with other Kansans who are facing a cancer diagnosis – and helping them any way I can.

This is personal to me, because my mom had the "wrong" kind of cancer – one that wasn't covered by Kansas' Early Detection Works program. If she had Medicaid, she might have been able to get the screenings and treatment she needed to survive her cancer. But cancer doesn't wait – and neither can Kansas.

I'm calling on our lawmakers to expand Medicaid and increase access to the lifesaving health coverage it provides. Because shouldn't every Kansan have a chance to live their healthiest life, like I did?

Stephanie Barr
Kansas State Lead Ambassador
Prairie Village



Everyday Kansans, like the people in this book, are waiting for lawmakers to expand access to Medicaid in our state. The stories that follow show how living without affordable health insurance hurts their families, careers, and health.



“One minute I had health insurance, the next it was gone. It was like a rug was pulled out from under me.”

Tammy, Shawnee

Tammy works in a warehouse and raises her teenage granddaughter. She doesn't get health insurance through her part-time work, earning \$10,000 a year and still makes too much to qualify for Medicaid. There are no affordable health insurance options for her in Kansas.

*“For parents or grandparents like me, there's no bigger priority than providing a safe and stable home for our kids. I work part-time while raising my granddaughter, and we moved to Shawnee, Kansas to give her the best chance at a safe and healthy childhood. Since moving, I've had to make tough decision after tough decision. **Right now I'm putting off getting knee surgery because we can't afford it.** Between groceries and our other bills, I have no choice but to live in constant pain while taking care of my granddaughter and working as much as my body will allow me to. I've dealt with these knee issues for many years, but it wasn't always this bad. When I lived in Missouri I could manage my condition, because unlike Kansas, Missouri has expanded Medicaid – which meant I qualified for health insurance and could get the care I needed. Before I moved here I had no idea that Kansas was one of 10 states that has failed to expand Medicaid, leaving people like me without the option to get health insurance.*

If Kansas were to expand Medicaid, I'd be able to manage my knee condition and get healthy enough to take on more hours at work to provide for my family. I know I'm not alone in believing Kansans shouldn't have to live without getting the health care they desperately need – health care they would get if they lived in a neighboring state.”



“Kansas lawmakers: Give us a chance. We want to get back to work – Medicaid expansion would give us that opportunity.”

Jim, Wichita

Jim grew up as the youngest of six kids on a Kansas farm – farming is in his blood, and he’s been driving tractors since the age of 6. He credits his work ethic to this upbringing – and to this day continues to be a farm worker.

“My earliest memories include watching my parents working on the farm from dawn until dusk every day – and eventually working alongside them. If you grew up in a family like mine, you’ll know how important an honest day’s work is. And throughout my adult life I’ve worked hard and had a number of different jobs. But farm work doesn’t always come with health insurance, and I’m sure other Kansans can relate to going through long stretches without any health insurance at all.

I have diabetes and in one of those periods without insurance, I started having complications related to not getting treatment – but I just couldn’t afford to get the care I needed. My bones became brittle and I developed an ulcer on my right foot. That ulcer became infected, and in May of 2022, they had to amputate my foot. That was just the beginning. After the surgery I faced a long road of intensive physical therapy and I had to learn how to use a wheelchair and a walker. I’ve spent my whole life working physical jobs on farms – so this was a huge adjustment. All of this was made a hundred times harder because I didn’t have health insurance at the time.

A few months after my surgery I was finally approved for Medicaid, and I have health insurance for the first time in years. I can’t describe how much my life has improved since then! I can actually afford the medications I’ve been prescribed, and have a doctor’s support to manage my diabetes. I never imagined I’d be able to walk or drive myself again – but I recently made the trip to my goddaughter’s college graduation and walked myself into the graduation ceremony. A year earlier that would have been impossible. People need health care – and health insurance makes that possible.

Access to health insurance through Medicaid gives people a chance to get healthy, get back to work, and get their life back. If I had insurance when I first started experiencing diabetes and related health issues I may have been able to keep my foot – and my life would look very different today.”





“Every Kansan deserves access to quality, affordable health insurance coverage. Medicaid expansion would make that a reality.”


Peggy, Wichita

Peggy is the President and CEO of the Wichita Black Nurses Association. Her job requires her to address the most serious health care needs facing our communities – and that includes educating her fellow Kansans about Medicaid expansion and what it would mean for our state.

“Every day, I meet Kansans who are living without health insurance. Kansans who are stuck in the “coverage gap” with no options for affordable, quality health coverage. There’s a wide gap between people who do and don’t have health insurance in Kansas – and more and more people are living without insurance because Kansas is one of 10 states that hasn’t expanded Medicaid.

When people don’t have health insurance, they can’t get the health care they need. And I see the results of this in my community day after day. When people don’t have insurance there are higher rates of preventable diseases because they can’t get regular screenings or check-ups. This hurts thousands of Kansans – especially when it comes to mental health, the health of new mothers and babies, and breast cancer care.

For all these reasons and more, nurses and providers are big advocates of Medicaid expansion in Kansas. It’s time for our state lawmakers to put affordable, quality health insurance within reach – it’s essential for the health of our state. Every Kansan deserves a fair shot at living a healthy life.”



“The people referring patients to us have this misconception that if you need help you can get it. Hospitals and providers refer people to us believing that we can find funding for anyone, and that’s just not true. The only guaranteed treatment is life stabilizing treatment in the ER. That doesn’t include something like cancer treatment.”

Molly, Kansas City

Molly is the director of the Community Health Council of Wyandotte County. She’s a longtime health care advocate with specialty experience helping Kansans enroll in health insurance.

“I still remember the early days of helping people in my community navigate signing up for health insurance on the brand-new ACA marketplace. At the time, about 25-30% of Wyandotte County residents were living without health insurance. Half of those without health insurance fell into the “Medicaid coverage gap” – making too much to qualify for Medicaid and too little to afford subsidized private insurance on the marketplace. I met with so many people who were excited to get health insurance for the first time in their lives. So you can imagine that it was absolutely devastating when we had to turn them away.

We do all we can to help Kansans living without health insurance get the care they need. During the COVID pandemic the government put protections in place so people wouldn’t lose their coverage. But after the pandemic ended, many of my patients lost their Medicaid coverage and became uninsured. They were upset or angry but worse, some people just gave up. They canceled appointments. They cancelled procedures. My community just gave up.

The lack of health insurance options in Kansas carry devastating effects for my patients and my staff. When you spend all day talking to people with no good options, it’s only natural to take it home with you. It’s why a lot of my staff are burning out. You can only say “I can’t help you” so many times before it affects your own mental health. Medicaid expansion in Kansas would make a huge difference. I could call the people I was forced to turn away and help them secure quality, affordable health coverage.”



“A hospital is an economic engine. Closing the coverage gap and expanding Medicaid is about improving the economic vitality of Kansas health care, which in turn will benefit local communities and the Kansas economy.”

Don, Dighton

Don is a fourth-generation farmer, rancher, and a Kansan whose family depends on the rural health care system. For Don, closing the Medicaid coverage gap is personal.

In 1998, my wife Betsy survived cardiac arrest, because the care was there when she needed it. To this day, we're both vigilant about her health. When we need to, we travel to the Scott County Hospital. It's a 26-minute drive from our house – but fortunately they have been able to keep their doctors on staff and doors open.

Some other rural hospitals in our state haven't been as lucky. A recent study indicated that [64% of rural hospitals](#) in Kansas are at risk of closing, putting care out of reach for our friends and neighbors in western Kansas.

When a hospital closes, it makes it harder for us to get care, we're forced to drive even further just to get to an emergency room. Our family knows first-hand how important it is to be able to receive care when you need it. There is evidence that hospitals in expansion states have more funds to pay their providers, deliver care to residents, and stay open – and this can mean the difference between life and death.

I'm passionate about protecting Kansas' rural hospitals and clinics, and like many Kansans, I'm concerned that without adequate funding, we will lose more of our rural health care facilities. Kansas is already struggling to recruit and retain health care providers, all while our neighboring states are operating with the infusion of cash from Medicaid expansion.

Right now I'm frustrated that Kansas isn't following in the footsteps of our neighbors who have already expanded their Medicaid programs. Expanding Medicaid would mean our federal tax dollars come home to our rural communities, instead of going to other states. The impacts go beyond health care – hospitals are economic engines, bringing jobs and opportunity back home to communities like mine.”

Closing the coverage gap will save lives and reduce the distance someone in rural Kansas must travel for lifesaving care.





“Most people don’t realize that Medicaid expansion would make the biggest difference for the working poor. People making \$10 or \$15 an hour working at Dairy Queen don’t have an extra \$1,000 each month to pay for health insurance. For hardworking Kansans, Medicaid expansion would be a game changer.”

Dr. Doug Gruenbacher, Quinter

Dr. Doug Gruenbacher specializes in full spectrum family medicine in Quinter, Kansas. He is one of five family medicine physicians with the Gove County Medical Center Blue Stem clinic.

“I’m a lifelong Kansan and have lived in Quinter for over 20 years. I love my hometown and am proud to serve my community. My patients work all sorts of jobs, they’re farmers, teachers, service industry and health care workers, to name a few. They range from newborns to people who have passed the century mark. And they have many different types of health insurance – Medicare, Medicaid, employer-sponsored coverage, Farm Bureau plans, but far too many don’t have any insurance at all.

People who don’t have health insurance often put off coming to see a doctor because they’re worried about how they’ll pay the bill. These delays can make health issues much worse than they need to be. I see it all the time, a case of pneumonia that could have been treated with oral antibiotics ends up putting someone in the hospital.

*It’s honestly one big balancing act. **We struggle to give uninsured patients the best care while trying to keep their costs down. Because the last thing we want is to saddle them with medical debt.** Sometimes it’s really tough because we need to provide quality care, without causing our patients to just get up and leave because they’re worried about having to declare bankruptcy if they get the treatment we’ve prescribed.*

If Medicaid were expanded in Kansas tomorrow it would be a lot simpler when people came in for care. We could just do a lot better job taking care of them and not be worrying about how to take care of them in the cheapest way possible.

What Kansans have to understand is that we’re all paying for the care our uninsured friends and neighbors are receiving. Hospitals have to provide emergency care and the cost goes somewhere. We are eventually paying for their care one way or another. Wouldn’t it be better to be able to treat people early instead of waiting for their health to worsen?

Medicaid expansion would lift huge burdens on Kansas providers, our state economy, and most importantly, our patients could get quality health care that everyone should be able to get, regardless of how much you earn or where you work.”





"I never thought about sharing my personal story or if it mattered, but I'm here to tell you that it does. We all need to keep sharing our stories of how important Medicaid is and what's at stake for Kansans if we resist expansion and instead send our federal tax dollars to neighboring states."

Don, Dighton