Do Florida lawmakers know COVID-19 is a public health emergency? They’re not acting like it | Opinion

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Florida, which never expanded Medicaid, is at a healthcare disadvantage in treating the coronavirus pandemic.

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When a Category 5 hurricane barrels across the Southeastern seaboard, Florida’s leadership wastes no time in deploying all available resources.

In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the same must be done now.

Even in states that have expanded Medicaid and robustly invested in their public-health systems, the grief wrought by the novel coronavirus will be vast. We have watched in horror as the suffering in Italy, a country with universal health coverage, is being shared in real time. Without a comparable government commitment to health coverage, Florida’s prospects are grievous.
The Sunshine State confronts COVID-19 with more than 2.5 million residents lacking access to covered healthcare. Years of fiscal cuts have left us with an anemic public-health system. And, in light of our threadbare safety net, those who survive paycheck to paycheck will be forced to choose between protecting their families from hunger and homelessness, or acting in the best interest of the public's health.

As always, the virus will hurt poor people the most; they will experience the worst health outcomes and the greatest economic harm.

Before our state elected officials close the door on the 2020 legislative session, they must address the deficiencies in our strained healthcare system, and maximize the potential of Medicaid, the nation’s first responder healthcare program. Not doing so will exponentially amplify COVID-19’s harm to our state’s residents and economy.

Florida should immediately take the following steps to address the present public health crisis:

- Expand Medicaid to cover all adults up to age 65 who earn up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

- Until the Legislature approves Medicaid expansion, Florida should extend temporary Medicaid eligibility to fund coronavirus screening and treatment for the state’s poorest residents.

- Suspend terminations of Medicaid and Florida KidCare benefits.

- Offer temporary payment increases for Medicaid patients in long-term care nursing facilities and other institutional settings, and for those receiving home and community-based care, to provide enhanced care as needed.

- Offer tax credits to businesses to encourage them to provide paid sick leave.

- Expand unemployment eligibility and benefits for those who experience an interruption in employment because of COVID-19.

- Address housing instability and anticipated evictions through emergency rental assistance programs as well as temporary suspension of evictions, as has been done in Miami-Dade.

This fast-moving virus is sounding the alarm. Infectious disease connects us all, and our state’s impoverished healthcare safety net and failure to expand Medicaid has put each of us in harm’s way.
There is limited time to reverse the trajectory of the pandemic across the state. The Florida Legislature and the appropriate state agencies must act decisively and swiftly to avert the worst possible outcomes.

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