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Expanding MaineCare will Make a Difference in Behavioral Health Treatment

Supporting Question 2
BY STEPHEN M. MERZ
Guest Column

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Right now, in emergency departments across Maine, people in crisis are waiting, often for days, for a hospital bed or other behavioral health treatment program.

Right now, in every county in Maine, people addicted to heroin or other opioids who want to stop using drugs and reclaim their lives cannot find help to come clean.

Right now, across our state, thousands of people struggle to get through the day because of untreated depression, anxiety or other mental illness.

Like much of the rest of the country, Maine faces a severe shortage of behavioral health resources. This results in lives diminished or ruined, and it carries a steep cost in terms of lost productivity and direct expenditures such as housing people with mental illness in our jails. It is a daunting problem with no single solution, but this November we all have a chance to make a difference by voting “yes” on Question 2.

Passage of Question 2 would expand Maine’s Medicaid program — known as MaineCare here — under the federal Affordable Care Act. Doing so would extend coverage to nearly 80,000 Mainers, many of whom are working but lack health insurance. It will leverage nearly \$500 million in federal funds into the state each year, creating 6,000 jobs. Maine’s share of the cost would be about a tenth of that, an amount equal to less than 2 percent of the state’s overall budget.

Having more people covered with health insurance and boosting our economy are good and important things for our state. But expanding MaineCare will also have an out-sized impact on our ability to provide mental health services to all Maine people.

Our organization, Maine Behavioral Healthcare, is the state’s largest provider of mental health services. Born of the merger of three regional community mental health organizations and Spring

Harbor Hospital, we provide services to thousands of Mainers from Belfast to the northeast, to Norway in the west and south to Springvale. Our scale and integration not only with a psychiatric hospital but also with MaineHealth, the state's largest hospital and healthcare system, help us in meeting the challenges of delivering quality, comprehensive mental health services.

Yet, we struggle. Not only are we not able to provide care to all who need our services, but our organization faces ongoing financial challenge. In fiscal year 2016, for instance, we posted an operating loss of \$1.4 million in a year when we provided more than \$7 million worth of care for which we did not get paid.

These daunting finances limit our ability to provide care to all who need it, and that's where expanding MaineCare comes in. If Maine had expanded its Medicaid program in fiscal 2016, it would have saved our organization \$3.9 million in uncompensated care. And, as a nonprofit, we would have put those resources directly into care for people in the communities we serve.

Lack of coverage is a particular problem for people suffering from drug addiction, a problem that is killing Maine people at the rate of one life lost per day. Of those seeking treatment for opioid use disorder and other addiction issues, 40 percent lack insurance of any kind.

That doesn't relieve us from an obligation to do more to help with the opioid crisis. Over the past two years, we've worked closely with our partners — including Mid Coast Hospital where they have an excellent model for treating addiction — to expand treatment to an additional 1,000 people. Still, it is not enough, and we are struggling to find resources to combat this epidemic.

Passage of Question 2 will not solve all the challenges associated with providing good, comprehensive mental health care for Maine people. Even today we have to combat the stigma associated with mental illness. And we need to continue on the path of seeing mental illness as important part of our overall wellbeing by integrating that care with great primary care in what we call Patient Centered Medical Homes.

But expanding MaineCare will make a significant difference. It will relieve suffering. It will save lives. And it will do so while also growing our economy.

I am proud to work with an incredible team of caring professionals who are in the field every day helping people in crisis, treating those with chronic mental illness and rescuing our neighbors caught in the grip of addiction. Please join me in voting "yes" on Question 2 Nov. 7 so we can continue this important work.

Stephen M. Merz, FACHE, is president and chief executive officer of Maine Behavioral Healthcare, the state's largest provider of inpatient and community based mental health services.