House Democrats seek vote on Medicaid expansion

By Tom LoBianco  
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INDIANAPOLIS — The Indiana House’s top Democrat urged his Republican colleagues on Friday to consider expanding Medicaid before a key legislative deadline next week, calling it one of the most important job-creating needs this year.

House Minority Leader Scott Pelath called on GOP leaders a day after Republican Gov. Mike Pence hit the brakes on legislation that would expand Medicaid in the state. Drafted by a bipartisan group of House members, the legislation calls for expanding the federally funded program but using the same principles as the Healthy Indiana Plan, including requiring enrollees to pay a monthly fee.

Supporters say that would allow the state to cover an expected 400,000 low-income residents who earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to buy their own insurance. HIP also was created to help fill that gap but currently covers only about 40,000 low-income residents, in part through a health savings account. The program operates on an experimental basis through a federal waiver.

Pelath said the legislation would help rein in $10.5 billion in federal money that would create health care jobs in Indiana.

“That needs to get a vote, it will pass,” Pelath said. “That is the biggest jobs bill of this session. That puts people back to work right away. Hospitals will start hiring people, because they’re going to be seeing people on a regular, sane basis, rather than in the emergency room.”

The House proposal won unanimous support in the House Public Health Committee last week, though Republicans outnumber Democrats in the full House 69-31.

On Thursday, Pence met with a small group of top Republican lawmakers and asked them to hold off on the bill. The governor wants to expand Medicaid through HIP, which would give the state more control over the expansion. He filed a waiver last week seeking approval to do so.

Medicaid expansions are being offered to states as part of President Barack Obama’s health care law.

Pence is waiting for a response before approving any expansion. House lawmakers have said that HIP might not be able to handle an increase from the roughly 40,000 residents enrolled in the program now to the hundreds of thousands who would qualify under the federal expansion.

House Public Health Committee Chairman Ed Clere, R-New Albany, said he hasn’t decided whether he will seek a vote on the bill Monday, the last day for House bills to win final approval before heading to the Senate. Clere said he was more concerned with developing a bill that a majority of lawmakers and the governor support.

The legislation drafted by Clere “was a way to get the conversation started, and we’ve accomplished that,” Clere said.