

Repeal of Obamacare will affect Medicaid patients

BY MICHAEL SZUKALA

As Erie County's Medicaid inspector general, I have received phone calls and emails from Medicaid clients concerned over how a victory by Donald Trump and a Republican-controlled House and Senate will impact their Medicaid benefits.

Health care reform was a key point of every major candidate in the 2016 presidential election.

Trump has pledged to save Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid "without cutting it to the bone." What exactly this will mean for the more than 274,000 people on Medicaid in Erie County is unclear.

What is clear is the president-elect has committed to repeal the Affordable Care Act, despite no clear replace-

ment being offered. The act covers people who can make effectively up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$33,000 annually for a family of four) in the 2017 open enrollment season (Nov. 1, 2016, through Jan. 31, 2017). Among other benefits, the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, sets limits on out-of-pocket maximum costs and deductibles for Medicaid.

These limits would no longer exist if the act is repealed. The elimination of the Affordable Care Act would also cause more than 50,000 Erie County residents to lose their health care.

It is possible that Medicaid coverage may change as soon as late this year. Important areas that may change include Medicaid's optional services.

These could be curtailed or elimi-

nated. Among the services Medicaid considers optional are dental services for adults, optometrist services, eyeglasses and transportation services.

For now, I offer the following advice:

If your doctor has asked you to make a healthful change in your life, now is the time. If you smoke, quit. If you need to change your diet, exercise more or do whatever your doctor has recommended for you, start now. The better your overall health, the easier it will be to absorb any changes to your health care.

If you haven't seen your doctor for an exam or checkup, schedule one soon. If you have a medical need, such as a scheduled surgery, have it addressed soon.

Remind the medical professionals

in your life that you are on Medicaid. If Medicaid benefits do change, ask about your treatment options. Working with your doctor, you may be able to find alternate covered treatments to replace a changed or eliminated benefit.

If you haven't established an emergency fund, now is a great time to begin. A cash reserve can help you deal with an unplanned medical emergency.

Medicaid paid more than \$1.6 billion for goods and services in Erie County in 2016.

Make a smart decision and prepare for any changes to your health care coverage now.

Michael Szukala is the Medicaid inspector general for Erie County.