

Health-care providers, experts react to ACA ruling

By Doug Blackburn
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Dr. Temple Robinson started celebrating before noon Thursday.

Robinson, the chief medical officer at Bond Community Health Center on Tallahassee's south side, described the U.S. Supreme Court's long-awaited ruling on the Affordable Care Act — the signature legislation of President Obama's first term — as “a great victory for the American people, especially the uninsured and under-insured.”

Bond provides care for an inordinately high proportion of that population, Robinson noted, and now that the highest court in the country has ruled that everyone must have health-care insurance, Bond also will benefit.

“It will relieve us of some of our financial burden. It will be a great help for us. It will decrease the strain,” Robinson said.

Another key provision of ACA, she said, is that people with pre-existing conditions cannot be denied coverage.

Mark O'Bryant, president and chief executive officer at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, compared Thursday's confirmation of ACA to the passage of Medicare and Medicaid generations earlier, and the significance it will have for health care in the U.S.

Because Florida led the challenge to the new law and has made little effort to begin implementing it, the state may find it difficult to be in compliance on time, O'Bryant said.

“There's no question the state is behind the curve. Most people who are in the know — and I'm not an expert in this — say it's going to be a steep hill to climb. Certainly the state has a tough challenge ahead of it,” O'Bryant said.

He added that, conceptually, ACA could eventually lead to lower insurance costs for people who are already insured. He referred to a “hidden tax” that the insured have been paying to help cover emergency-room and other high costs for those who are uninsured or under-insured.

Not everyone viewed Thursday's Supreme Court decision as a final statement on health care in America. Marshall Kapp, director of the Center for Innovative Collaboration in Medicine and Law at Florida State University, believes the legal wrangling over health care has only just begun.

Congress will have to decide how it is going to fund some of the costlier elements of ACA, Kapp said, predicting drawn-out battles over appropriations.

"I suspect during the next legislative session, both on the federal and state levels, there's going to be a lot of debate about whether the ACA represents good policy, whether it ought to be repealed, whether it ought to be tinkered with," Kapp said.

Two of Kapp's colleagues at FSU, public-policy expert Jill Quadagno and Dr. Les Beitsch, associate dean for health affairs at the College of Medicine, each touted the Supreme Court's ruling.

"This is a great victory for equity, for health, for people that matter beyond the 1 percent," Beitsch said. "There are so many people who are uninsured in our country."

Quadagno, the author of "One Nation Uninsured," said the ACA had been a century in the making.

"Since 1910, people and presidents have been trying to find ways to guarantee people have health insurance. Even (Richard) Nixon had a plan. It's an amazing achievement for an American president to get a health-care law that guarantees everyone will have health-care coverage," Quadagno said.

Oretha Jones, executive director of Neighborhood Health Services, a nonprofit center based in Frenchtown, said she was thrilled to learn many of her patients will finally have health insurance.

"That's half the battle," she said. "The next half is getting them access. That's exactly what we're trying to provide."