The Big Beautiful Bill vs. The Bayou

As Medicaid are finalized under the 2025 federal budget, Jesse Bartley is already prepared for impact—while others brace for uncertainty and growing regret.

By: Alexandra Thompson

More than 60 percent of Louisiana voters supported Donald Trump in 2024, but as Jesse Bartley sees it, the Trump administration has made a big mistake with its massive cuts to Medicaid, which are going to hit hard.

“Shoot, these people don't know what they got themselves into. They’ll see, they’ll see. That man is crocked… you gon try and take away Medicaid? Boy I tell ya,” Mr. Bartley, a community advocate in Ascension Parish, south of Baton Rouge, said recently, shaking his head in disapproval as he pushed down on the worn and tattered arms of his tweed recliner to lean toward the TV, turning up the volume a few notches past loud.

Bartley’s vision, supported by glacier-thick bifocals, narrows in on the TV monitor while listening to WBRZ News 2 Louisiana discuss the loss in federal Medicaid funding up to $4 billion that the state could face as a result of the Trump administration's One Big Beautiful Budget Bill Act.

Bartley, 89, is a Vietnam veteran and lifelong Democrat. In his lifetime — spent entirely nestled along the curve of the serpentine body of the Mississippi River — he has witnessed the integration of schools through the late 1960s and 1970s, the defending of social programs, the era of so-called “Welfare Queens” under Reagan, Hurricane Katrina, and the first Trump administration

Bartley also remembers the inception of Medicare and Medicaid through the Social Security amendments signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 30, 1965, as part of his Great Society initiative. As the country approaches the 60th anniversary of those social safety net programs, Mr. Bartley recalled, “Republicans were mad then, just like they are now.” He shook his head., “But it was never ever anything like this, I’ll tell you.”

The cuts to social programs and healthcare under the new law will be the most severe in the program’s history. Since the start of the Trump’s second term and initial discussions of reducing federal spending, slashing budgets and annual fund distributions to state-based programs such as Medicaid and SNAP have been a priority for the White House.

However, for many residents like Bartley, how his community will continue to access and afford healthcare is now a massive concern — especially for elderly adults like him.

“The number of people around here, who rely on this,” he said, shaking his finger at the TV, “And the number of them who are sick. Sick sick. Diabetes. Blood pressure… And it’s not just Black and Afro-Americans. It’s the white communities too.”

Louisiana has long stood out in the national Medicaid landscape, with more than 2million residents — roughly 42 percent of the state — relying on the program for health coverage. That safety net grew in 2016 when the state expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, unlocking care for thousands of low-income adults.

In Ascension Parish, a community of about 130,000, roughly 25 percent — more than 31,000 people — currently rely on Medicaid for their health coverage. That number was even higher – roughly 36,000 –before the pandemic-era eligibility redetermination process resumed.

The COVID-era unwinding of continuous coverage protections — in which individuals remained on Medicaid regardless of changes in eligibility or circumstance — has already left many scrambling: rushing to reverify eligibility, to navigate confusing paperwork, or, in some cases, go without care altogether.

The weight of that disruption is falling hardest on individuals and families managing chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and asthma, all of which are disproportionately prevalent in the Pelican State.

As a result of the new Budget law, eligibility requirements are expected to become even more stringent, while communication from health departments and administrative agencies grows increasingly opaque and less accessible to those most affected.

Many now fear that this latest wave of redeterminations — the review of participants' eligibility for a federal program — will deepen instability, forcing thousands to brace for more disruption, longer lapses in care, and mounting health risks.

"A lot of people don't really know what's going to happen, you know. You can't buy medication in surplus. Now the Black community. The elderly. We'll be alright. But other people, the ones who didn't want Harris. I don't know. But they voted for him."

State Senator Edward Price, a Democrat who represents Louisiana's 2nd District, confirmed Mr. Bartley's sentiments. And said voter regret and underlying fear have been festering over the last couple of months.

Price said the uncertainty of Medicaid coverage and access has caused more constituents to pay attention — and to panic — for answers, calling the state capitol office under one condition: anonymity.

"Leading up to the passing of the budget bill, I think my office alone had about 100 voicemails from individuals from all over the state calling, asking what they should do about their Medicaid coverage," Price said. "If the bill was going to pass, this, that, and the third. One man, who has called multiple times since January, wanted to make sure that he could not change his vote. As in 'vote from the 2024 Presidential Election,' because he wanted to keep his Medicaid coverage."

He added, “But before hanging up, they all wanted to make sure. No one else would know that they called. Let alone relying on someone from the opposing political party.”

Ironically, Louisiana — home to House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA), who openly supported the bill — did not stop state lawmakers from both parties and advocates from introducing a state resolution against the budget bill because of its projected impact on Medicaid.

Even more notably, in Speaker Johnson’s own district, about 40 percent of the population relies on Medicaid services.

“It seems he's forgetting not only that he should be working for the people, but also the southern roots in which he came from. Just because you made it to Washington does not mean you get to hurt the people of Louisiana at any cost,” Price said. “You got to your position because of the people, and you are supposed to be acting in the best interest of the people. And those people are not sitting in that big ole White House in D.C.”