

Lawmakers grill health officials on MRT, local share of Medicaid

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ALBANY — Senate and Assembly lawmakers pressed the Cuomo administration on Wednesday for more details on its plan to close the state's Medicaid shortfall and curb future spending through a redesign and changes to local administration of the program.

With [information still sparse on a reconvened Medicaid Redesign Team](#), which Gov. Andrew Cuomo unveiled as part of his fiscal year 2021 budget, lawmakers spent nearly four hours pushing Health Commissioner Howard Zucker and Medicaid Director Donna Frescatore for clarifications on who will participate in the process, when it will begin its work and what its scope will include.

The MRT 2 is tasked with identifying \$2.5 billion in Medicaid savings by April 1.

Several lawmakers also voiced concerns about a proposal to require [localities to pay for increases in Medicaid spending beyond 3 percent in a year](#).

State Sen. Gustavo Rivera, a Bronx Democrat and chairman of his chamber's Health Committee, [questioned whether the new redesign effort](#) can make comprehensive changes by the budget's deadline at the end of March. He called it "completely unrealistic."

"It's now January 29 and we don't have any details. ... It is a little bit concerning — scratch that, [a lot] concerning — that you're coming to a public hearing and telling us that by April 1 we have to accept something that is going to be put together by a magical crew of folks, who we don't know their power and we have to accept or there will be across-the-board cuts," he said. "That is not acceptable — I'm saying that to you and to the governor — it's not acceptable what you're asking us to do."

Zucker said the administration is "working on" an executive order to officially form the new MRT and would "get back to [lawmakers] quickly" on who will take part in that process. He would not commit to "a date and time" for when the nascent MRT 2 will submit its recommendations to lawmakers.

The health commissioner added that while the MRT 2 faces a quick turnaround, he's confident it will "rise to the occasion again." (The original MRT was formed in 2011 when the program faced similar problems.) Zucker would not say specifically whether the redesign team will be barred from looking at changing the global cap.

"We have nine years' worth of time behind this now regarding many challenges the state has faced and we will move forward from there," he said.

Assembly Health Chairman Richard Gottfried (D-Manhattan) cast the original MRT as “political theater.” He raised concerns that the new redesign effort will only offer proposals “chosen behind closed doors by executive branch staff.”

“Was the cake batter already mixed and been in the oven, and we’re now putting the icing on it before the MRT has even been made?” Gottfried asked.

Senate Finance Chairwoman Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan), meanwhile, argued that it could “be a conflict of interest” for Northwell Health CEO Michael Dowling — one of only two announced members of the redesign effort — to lead the new MRT. Zucker rejected the suggestion, noting that other members will also provide input on the redesign.

Krueger and other lawmakers further asked the administration officials to detail how the budget’s proposed changes to the local share of Medicaid will affect counties.

Cuomo, in announcing his budget, said the state would [commit to paying the entire increase in Medicaid costs](#) for local governments that stay within the 2 percent property tax cap and control Medicaid costs to 3 percent growth annually.

Noting that localities follow federal and state Medicaid rules, Rivera argued that the governor’s budget would hold them accountable “for things they don’t have control over.” Gottfried, meanwhile, asked whether the administration has “any shred of evidence” of misconduct among local officials who help determine eligibility for long-term care.

Frescatore said while state and federal law set eligibility limits, local officials make about 47 percent of eligibility determinations for long-term care. She argued that the governor’s budget proposal isn’t about placing blame on localities but creating “a partnership with local districts that share in administration of the Medicaid program.”

Zucker added that the department has not yet calculated what counties would be affected by the governor’s budget proposal.

State Sen. Alessandra Biaggi (D-Westchester), Krueger and others, meanwhile, expressed concerns about the [oversight of Maximus](#), with whom the state contracts to help administer long-term care services at the local level.

Rivera called on the administration to be more transparent, particularly on the MRT and local share.

“What you’re asking us to do as a Legislature is to trust you — folks, this doesn’t build trust,” he said. “I will only speak for myself, but we don’t trust you. You’ve got to build that.”