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Jim Hart: Don't let lobbyists decide who gets health-care dollars

Jim Hart
My View

We have an opportunity, in this new era of transparency and accountability, to thoughtfully re-examine many of the practices of our government. One of the first places to look in Florida is the LIP Council. Never heard of it? You are not alone, and what you do not know about the LIP Council may infuriate you.

LIP stands for Low Income Pool. The LIP Council was created several years ago to distribute \$1 billion each year to hospitals and other health facilities in Florida that provide care to patients with little or no insurance. The intent behind the LIP Council is to provide ongoing financial support to facilities that would otherwise find it difficult to recover these costs.

It sounds good, and the facilities that provide the care and receive the funds are all fine institutions, but unfortunately the process for the distribution of the funds is broken. It lacks transparency and accountability. The LIP Council consists of 17 members, and almost all of them are lobbyists or direct employees of the hospitals that receive the money.

These special interests distribute more than \$1 billion each year, and who ends up getting the money? The hospitals they work for. The LIP council allows for a unique arrangement in which industry insiders tell the Legislature how to spend the money. The lack of taxpayer representation in the process and inherent conflict of interest is simply unacceptable.

Imagine the outrage if we would put the road builders in charge of distributing transportation funds, or if the defense industry got to decide where Pentagon dollars would go.

Well that's exactly what is happening here with taxpayer funds for health care — and some seem to be looking the other way.

We elect our state senators and state representatives so they can make the tough decisions on how to spend our tax dollars, and then we can hold them accountable for those decisions. Distributing the LIP funds is exactly the kind of decision our elected leaders should be making — not the special-interest groups that benefit from these funds.

Let me be clear, we're not advocating against the LIP funds or any of the hospitals that receive them. We're simply saying that lobbyists and executives who work for these hospitals should not be involved, in any way shape or form, in the process.

Reimbursing our hard-working doctors, nurses and other medical professionals for providing care to all is a worthy and commendable goal. But get the lobbyists out of the business of distributing our taxpayer money.

If we are going to be serious about government accountability, the hide-and-seek games lobbyists are playing with taxpayer dollars simply do not belong in the state of Florida. It's time to abolish the LIP Council and hold elected officials accountable for the people's money.

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Retired Brig. Gen. Jim Hart served 37 years of active duty with the Air Force and reserve duty with the Alabama Air National Guard. He is currently chairman of Floridians for Government Accountability. Contact him at jimwhart@digitalexp.com.