

# As Missouri's Medicaid sign-ups lag, faith leaders want to pick up the slack

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CareSTL Health

Gerald Bay of Missouri Faith Voices goes door to door to spread Medicaid enrollment information earlier this year. The statewide group of religious St. Louis Public Radio

**Fresh Air**

Religious leaders in Missouri are trying to persuade people to sign up for the state's recently expanded Medicaid program.

Members of the grassroots organization Missouri Faith Voices say they need to spread the word about the health insurance program. Missouri voters in 2020 expanded the Medicaid program to cover adults who make around \$18,000 a year or less. But many people haven't heard the news, the organization's leaders said.

"There is no state backing, there's no advertisement," said Gerald Ray, the organization's Black health advocacy organizer. "There's no marketing to let the people know that this is an option for them. So what we've decided to do is to get the congregations organized to go into the communities."

The nonprofit is made up of faith leaders in St. Louis, Springfield, Jefferson City and other parts of the state. In St. Louis, the group and the community health clinic CareSTL Health are recruiting church members and people in the community to help. The volunteers are going door to door in neighborhoods and calling people to explain what Medicaid is, how it works and who is now eligible to receive the health insurance benefits.

The state has so far [enrolled around 28%](#) of the estimated 275,000 Missourians now eligible for Medicaid benefits. Tens of thousands of people are waiting for their applications to be processed, [which can take more than 100 days](#). Critics have said [the state has done little more than required](#) to get the word out to the state's poorest, most vulnerable people.

Many Missourians don't know that adults of all ages are now eligible, Ray said.

"What we found is that the community doesn't know that this is an option," Ray said. "When you say Medicare or Medicaid, you think elderly. But now with the expansion, it's from 18 to 65."

The group is identifying low-income college students who might not be on their school or parents' health insurance plans, he said.

It makes sense for churches, temples and other faith-based organizations to act as a bridge between public health authorities and communities, particularly lower-income ones, said Angela Brown, CEO of the St. Louis Regional Health Commission.

"I think there is a gap between our health care providers and the communities that they serve in terms of trustee relationships, where people feel like they can go to them for just factual information," she said.

In the past two years, churches in Black neighborhoods [have dispersed information about the coronavirus and encouraged people to get the COVID-19 vaccine](#), she said.

Unlike [with some of those initiatives](#), public health officials aren't behind Faith Voices' push to enroll more people in Medicaid.

It's important for churches and temples to make sure their congregants are healthy, said Bishop-elect DWayne Elliott of Body of Christ Christian Ministries.

"As a church and as a body of believers, we're supposed to help out in any way that we can," said Elliott, who recently attended a phone-banking event at CareSTL Health's Wells-

incumbent upon us to share it for the purpose of making their life better, and getting them the resources that they need for health care."

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