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Preserve domestic-partner benefits

By **Barbara A. Atwood**

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A bill pending in the Arizona Senate (SB 1174) would eliminate the domestic-partnership benefits for state employees that became available in October.

Withdrawing the benefits would be a mistake, and not just for those people who desperately need the benefits for health insurance. Withdrawing the benefits would signal to the world that Arizona is taking a step backward rather than forward.

Arizona extended domestic-partnership benefits to state employees by action of the Governor's Regulatory Review Council in 2008. The proposal was open for public comment in December 2007, and the comments that were received overwhelmingly supported the change in benefits eligibility.

The positive response of the public is not surprising. Domestic-partnership benefits are widely available across the nation. Thousands of governmental and private employers now offer such benefits as part of their employee-benefits packages. Until last October, Arizona's universities were the only schools in the Pac-10 not to provide such benefits.

Thanks to the administrative rule change, we're no longer out of sync with the rest of our peer institutions. Clearly, the availability of domestic-partnership benefits can help us recruit and retain faculty and staff.

Recognizing domestic partnerships is not about same-sex marriage. The definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman is the law in Arizona, and the passage of Proposition 102 placed the definition in our state Constitution.

The domestic-partnership rules, in contrast, extend benefits to the registered partners of state employees, whether same-sex or opposite-sex, and make available essential access to health insurance. Indeed, supporters of Proposition 102 emphasized this distinction last fall when they argued that their target was same-sex marriage, not the benefits associated with civil unions or domestic partnerships.

Although fewer than a thousand new enrollees are expected as a result of Arizona's domestic-partnership program, for that small group the benefits are of critical importance.

Through the program, domestic partners of employees finally have access to health insurance. They and their children can receive preventive care, early diagnosis of health problems and other medical treatment that isn't available to the uninsured. In these hard economic times, the domestic-partnership benefits are a lifeline.

The cost to the state is minimal relative to the overall budget. The state's expenses, moreover, are partially recouped through income tax paid by employees for the state's contributions for domestic partner coverage. In addition, the availability of medical insurance for domestic partners relieves some portion of expense that the state would otherwise bear for medical care for the uninsured.

The cost to the state may be minor, but the value to the individual is priceless.

Gov. Jan Brewer could demonstrate real leadership by opposing SB 1174.

Eliminating the domestic-partnership program could financially devastate those individuals who would lose their health insurance by such a move. Arizona took a much needed step forward last year. It's not the time to reverse course.

Write to Barbara A. Atwood at baatwood1@cox.net