A responsible safety net
By Will Weatherford
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The Florida Legislature concluded the 2013 session with a slate of accomplishments of which Florida can be proud.

For the first time in decades, we passed comprehensive ethics reform to raise the conduct standards for elected officials and increase penalties for breaches of public trust. We put an end to committees of continuous existence that were too often used as political slush funds and increased campaign transparency and accountability. With overwhelming support of both Democrats and Republicans, we rewrote the election code to ensure that Floridians will not have to wait in long lines to cast their votes.

In addition, we funded a billion-dollar increase to K-12 education, gave $70 million for the Everglades, increased funding for public safety, and created an accredited public online university.

We finished our “jobs and education” agenda on time and without a tax increase on the people of Florida.

What we didn’t do this session is expand Medicaid. This wasn’t an oversight but a thoughtful, researched and purposeful action on the part of the House of Representatives.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down portions of the Affordable Care Act and stated that the federal government could not force states to expand Medicaid. Instead, they left the choice to us.

As a Legislature, we approached this important decision by investigating the facts. We learned the current “take it or leave it, all or nothing” approach by the federal government was flawed and didn’t meet the needs of our state.

We agreed that Florida should have a strong safety net for those truly in need. Simply expanding Medicaid eligibility and increasing cost without a plan to sustainably pay for it
does not strengthen the safety net. The cost of Medicaid in Florida is $21 billion, and as that share of the budget grows, we have fewer resources to fund other critical needs, such as education and infrastructure. Unlike Washington, Florida has a constitutional requirement to balance our budget.

Medicaid’s clinical outcomes are also concerning. A recent landmark study in Oregon found “no significant improvements in measured physical health outcomes in the first 2 years” among Medicaid patients.

Some critics have said Florida is leaving billions of dollars of federal funding on the table. The money offered by the federal government to expand Medicaid is not taxes Floridians have already sent to Washington.

Congress has not passed a budget in four years, and each year the federal government spends over a trillion dollars more than it has, leading to a national debt approaching $17 trillion. Expanding Medicaid would require borrowing more money, drastically expanding our deficit.

As a legislator, citizen, and parent, I cannot support a massive increase to the crippling debt we are passing on to our children.

But instead of simply saying no to Medicaid expansion, the Florida House developed a plan to meet Florida’s needs.

House Bill 7169 would have covered parents and disabled adults with incomes under the poverty level who are not eligible for Medicaid. This would have been accomplished within existing state resources.

I believe this is the responsible way to provide coverage for families in need while acting in the best interest of Florida’s 19 million citizens and future generations.

A Forbes columnist said of this plan, “It would be the first such plan passed in any U.S. state, one that could help lay the groundwork for broader, market-based reforms. It would cover 55 percent of the Florida population eligible for Obamacare’s Medicaid expansion, but would do so in a far more cost-effective manner.”
Although this bill did not pass the Legislature this year, we will continue to work on a solution that is driven by the free market, is funded sustainably, and provides the best possible health care to those truly in need.

Florida isn’t alone in its struggles with the irresponsible D.C. dictates on this matter. According to recent reports, nearly 30 states have either rejected Medicaid expansion or are contemplating rejection.

It is time for the Obama administration to put aside a social agenda and truly give states the tools to make decisions in the best interest of the people.

The Florida House is proactively providing real solutions for our state, because increasing Florida’s dependence on Washington is not the answer to solving our health care challenges.

Going forward, Florida has a role to play as a national leader in putting forth sustainable, affordable alternatives to ensure our people have access to quality health care.

*Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, is the speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. He wrote this commentary at the request of The Tampa Tribune.*