

Lawmakers unveil slate of bills aimed to aid women, the poor

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SALT LAKE CITY

A bipartisan group of Utah lawmakers unveiled plans Thursday to eliminate Utah's sales tax on groceries, provide birth control for poor women and tackle the gender pay gap — proposals that could be a tough sell in the Republican-dominated Legislature where leaders say the costs of social programs and tax credits and exemptions already have the potential to bust budgets.

Some of the bills from about a dozen lawmakers are backed by groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, child advocacy group Voices for Utah Children, and the Salt Lake Chamber business group, but the legislators noted that not all of them support every proposal the group is working on.

The plans may also face an uphill battle in a conservative Legislature that resisted expanding Medicaid to more than 100,000 of Utah's working poor because of concerns about the cost. Edwards said that while providing health care coverage for the working poor is a major way to help families find economic success, "We're sort of saying, all right, maybe there's not a lot of political appetite for that right now. Let's try and address some other things," Rep. Becky Edwards, R-North Salt Lake. "It's just another way to focus on it from different angles."

A look at some of the bills legislators discussed Thursday:

TAXES AND TAX CREDITS

A proposal from Rep. John Westwood, R-Cedar City would allow the working poor to get a tax credit of up to \$600 if their family has been in poverty for at least two generations and they claimed a similar federal tax credit.

Rep. Tim Quinn, R-Heber City, spoke of his plans to eliminate Utah's 1.75 percent sales tax on groceries. To pay for the cut, Quinn would raise Utah's sales tax rate to 4.94 percent, up from its current 4.7 percent rate. Quinn said he's a conservative but he sees

the proposal as a moral issue. If everyone pays a little bit more for clothes and other goods, the poorest will get some relief when buying groceries. Democratic Rep. Susan Duckworth of Salt Lake City says she also plans to bring back a twice-rejected plan to exempt tampons, disposable diapers and other incontinence products from the sales tax.

BIRTH CONTROL

Republican Rep. Ray Ward has a proposed a program that would cover the costs of birth control for poor women who aren't eligible for Medicaid or other government insurance programs. Ward says the plan could help women and their families climb out of poverty by preventing unwanted pregnancies and would save taxpayer money and prevent abortions.

PAID LEAVE

Rep. Elizabeth Weight, D-West Valley City, has a proposal that would provide six weeks of paid parental leave for state employees who adopt a new child or give birth to a new child. Edwards said she is working on bills creating a tax credit for businesses that offer paid family and medical leave and savings accounts that families and companies can pay into to help fund workers' child care costs.

DISCRIMINATION

Edwards has a proposal in the works to require all of Utah's small businesses to comply with the state's workplace discrimination laws. The state law protects against discrimination based on factors like race, religion, sexual orientation and sex and currently exempts businesses with fewer than 15 employees. Rep. Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, said his bill will work to ensure workers face a fair process when pursuing a claim of discrimination against their employer. His plan is a response to an audit last year that found the state agency that investigates discrimination complaints sides with workers less than 1 percent of the time, and its mediators are instructed by law to encourage workers to accept a settlement.