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Grant will help Kids Connect
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Yakima County has received an \$852,000 federal grant to create a program that will attempt to increase preventive health care for children and reduce emergency-room traffic.

Kids Connect, set to begin Feb. 6, will place eight bilingual access specialists in seven local health-care agencies. When families go to one of those agencies, such as Sunnyside Community Hospital, and are interested in insurance or finding a family physician, the specialist will help connect them with those services.

The idea for Kids Connect started three years ago, when the Yakima County Health Care Coalition, a group of Yakima Valley agencies working to help families find affordable health care, became aware that many people were not pursuing preventive care for their children.

Instead, they would wait until a child became sick and then take them to an emergency room, said Anita Monoian, chief executive officer of Yakima Neighborhood Health Service, one of the coalition members.

"We wanted to find ways to strengthen relationships between families and primary health-care providers outside the emergency room," she said.

They also wanted to increase the number of local children who are insured. About 11,000 children in Yakima County are not covered by health insurance, said Diane Patterson, Kids Connect program administrator.

So the coalition, with Yakima County as the lead agency, applied for a two-year grant from the Bureau of Primary Health Care, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that works to improve health care for uninsured and underinsured people around the nation.

Eighteen grants were awarded among 72 applicants nationally this year. Yakima County is the only recipient that was given the full amount it requested.

Kids Connect will use a software system to create a database of services so specialists can easily direct people to programs. It will also allow them to track their progress, said Kim Tully, senior manager of the county's grants department.

By the time the two-year grant period ends, Patterson said, the agencies should be able to incorporate what they've learned from the specialists into their regular care.

The agencies that will have specialists are Central Washington Family Medicine, Educational Service District 105, Medical Associates of Yakima, Sunnyside Community Hospital, Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic and Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, which will have two.