

From the YakimaHerald.com Online News.

Published on Tuesday, February 13, 2007

[Printable Version](#) [E-mail to a Friend](#)

Local official pushes health care for kids

By LIA STEAKLEY

FOR THE YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

OLYMPIA -- Approximately 10,000 children in Yakima County could receive health-care coverage over the next three years through a proposal currently being considered by lawmakers.

"Oftentimes, families without insurance turn to emergency rooms for treatment. Emergency room care is six times more expensive than if the person had visited a primary care doctor for treatment," said Anita Monoian, chief executive officer of Yakima Neighborhood Health Services. "Not providing insurance costs the state more."

Today, Monoian is meeting with representatives from Central Washington to try to persuade them to support measures House Bill 1071 and Senate Bill 5093 aimed at insuring Washington's approximately 73,000 children currently without medical coverage. If the measures pass, coverage would be extended to an additional 32,000 children.

"If a child doesn't feel well, they can't learn and a child that can't learn has the potential to become a nonproductive member of society. This is about improving quality of life (for thousands) and investing in the future generation," Monoian says.

Last week, Gov. Chris Gregoire and Democratic legislative leaders committed the state to universal health-care coverage within five years.

The plan, called the Healthy Washington Initiative, seeks to cover all children and crack down on emergency room overuse. Over time, the governor said, the proposal will rein in costs and make sure all Washington residents have coverage.

But the situation isn't so cut and dry, say some lawmakers. Although the state is sitting on a \$1.9 billion surplus this year, Washington could fall on hard times, forcing lawmakers to make cuts that could take health-care coverage away from children in the future.

"The goal is admirable but I'm not sure it's sustainable," said Republican Sen. Jim Honeyford of Sunnyside. "The governor's budget has a lot of education and health-care programs that have the potential to create some serious funding problems down the line. There's the potential that if we insure every child in the state, that we'll be faced with the decision of withdrawing coverage from children in four years."

The family-income level at which children are eligible for services has Honeyford and other lawmakers worried the program will drain the state's coffers. Under the bills, children under the age of 19 whose family income is 250 percent of the federal poverty line, or about \$51,000 for a family of four, would be covered first. Individuals with family incomes not greater than 300 percent of the federal poverty level, or

approximately \$60,000 for a family of four, would be covered starting Jan. 1, 2009.

"This is setting up a huge promise that the state is not going to be able to keep," said Republican Rep. Bruce Chandler of Granger. "I think we can take care of those that are truly low income, but families with an income of \$60,000 a year are not low income. That's higher than the median income in all but two counties of the state."

Monoian counters that although many individuals earn a decent wage, they work for companies that don't provide health insurance. Furthermore, they earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, which leaves thousands of children and adults without medical coverage.

"The trend in business is for companies to switch to independent contractors or part-time employees so they can cut costs by not providing benefits," she said.

For the second year in a row, the number of Washington employers offering health insurance declined, according to the results of a 2006 benefits survey released Monday by the state Employment Security Department. The percentage of employers offering health benefits to full-time workers declined slightly from 67.8 percent in 2004 to 66.4 percent last year. The report notes that employers may have offset rising health-insurance premiums and rising worker wages with reduced benefit offerings.

Chandler says he favors resolving the health-care crisis with policies that encourage people to choose their own health-care provider and deal directly with their doctor of choice.

"We need a predictable, sustainable program. These bills do nothing to reduce the cost of health-care coverage, which is the real underlying problem."