

OPINION

State leaders give child health care its due

Every day, thousands of parents in Washington state face a terrible choice: Whether to put off that doctor visit, or put off that grocery trip. It is a scenario that all too often leads to a visit to the emergency room, where taxpayers are left holding the bag for the costly care required to treat otherwise routine ailments.

This year in Olympia, state lawmakers declared their dedication to find a way to provide health care coverage for all our children. It's an ambitious but very worthy goal. As we reflect upon the legislative session, our legislators and Gov. Christine Gregoire deserve praise. They took action to support children's health, a sensible and sustainable priority for the future of Yakima County and Washington state.

These actions made significant strides in reducing the numbers of uninsured children in the state and in our county. And perhaps most importantly, Washington's lawmakers committed to the goal of providing health coverage for all Washington children by 2010. This is a sign that legislators are hearing the cries for help from the families of the 100,000 uninsured children in Washington who are shut out from the health care they need to stay



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Guest Commentary

healthy. Moreover, they heard the calls of Washingtonians, the vast majority of whom support ensuring that preventative health care is available to all.

The 2005-07 budget passed by the Legislature extends health care coverage to 38,000 more Washington state children. Specifically, the governor and Legislature eliminated Medicaid administrative barriers that have caused 57,000 children to lose health insurance over the past three years — including roughly 6,000

in Yakima County. They restored the 12-month (rather than six-month) certification period for children's Medicaid eligibility. Legislators also reinstated continuous eligibility. This allows children to maintain coverage for one year regardless of fluctuations in family income. Other gains for children's health coverage, included delaying the implementation of Medicaid premiums until 2007. This is a sensible move, since premiums would mean thousands of children would lose health insurance, and premium collection would prove costly.

These changes are particularly relevant to our community, with 55 percent of the children in Yakima County covered by Medicaid. In fact, Yakima County ranks fourth out of 39 counties in total child Medicaid enrollment.

Legislators and the governor also re-authorized Medicaid coverage for non-U.S. citizen children up to 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. This will ensure that this vulnerable group is insured for health care services that are appropriate and necessary for children, including vision and dental care. Again, Yakima County in particular will benefit from this policy.

Together, these policies represent major progress toward reversing the steep decline in children's coverage that began in 2002, and they're smart choices for Washington.

Why are the governor and Legislature's actions praiseworthy? Just like all good legislation, the numbers make good sense. Children are the least expensive group to insure; while they constitute 64 percent of Medicaid enrollees, they account for less than 25 percent of Medicaid expenditures.

Insuring children for preventative care is sound fiscal policy. Children without insurance are less likely to get preventive health care — like immunizations and checkups — and are therefore more likely to use the emergency room and be hospitalized for otherwise preventable illnesses. So instead of leaving taxpayers on the hook for thousands of dollars for every emergency room visit caused by a routine ailment gone too far, we can provide the security and peace of mind of Medicaid coverage for children at pennies on the dollar (about \$850 per child in state dollars).

The miracle of child health is at once very resilient and very fragile. Early intervention in a child's health

problem can produce a favorable outcome. Delayed attention can result in slowed development, extended illness, disability and even death.

Our state leaders understand that this is not only a moral and economic issue, but an issue of progress. Children without access to health care are more likely to miss critical days of school and are not able to obtain the immunizations and other health requirements necessary to be admitted to school. These children are simply left behind. And that puts our state's future in jeopardy.

So we thank our state leaders for recognizing that the most innocent among us, our children, deserve nothing less than the best chances we can give them to live free from disease and to grow and learn. After all, our hopes and dreams will live on long after we are gone, but only if we equip all children with the basic foundation of health upon which they can become the leaders of the future.

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