

Insurance for poorest kids gets push

A measure in the House is designed to get uninsured children who qualify for public programs enrolled

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Utah doesn't do a good job getting its poorest children onto public health insurance - more than a third could be enrolled in programs like CHIP and Medicaid but aren't.

That's why the Utah Health Policy Project is pushing a bill to spur enrollment of children who have been identified by public schools as uninsured.

Parents already tell districts whether their children are insured when they sign up for free or reduced school lunches, but there isn't a good mechanism for giving that data to health officials said Jerry Cochran, a health policy analyst for Voices for Utah Children, which also helped draft the legislation.

Sponsored by Rep. Kory Holdaway, R-Taylorville, HB364 would require the Department of Workforce Services and the Department of Health to work with the Utah State Board of Education to identify eligible children.

The idea piggybacks on Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s call for health-system reform, said Utah Health Policy Project's director Judi Hilman. That support "was our ticket to finally make an unapologetic case to get families into these programs," she said.

In 2006, the Legislature boosted CHIP funding by \$4 million to cover 12,000 more children. Because families are dropping out of the program in larger numbers than expected, however, there are about 14,500 slots to fill.

The bill also would make both adults and children eligible for the Utah Premium Partnership Program [UPP] if their income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Now, adults qualify if they earn below 150 percent. Families also would be allowed to immediately enroll in an employer's health plan when they qualify for UPP, rather than waiting for open enrollment. UPP helps pay premiums in such plans.

Another bill, HB131, would give \$350,000 in grants to community groups that would help low-income and underserved residents - including minorities - enroll in public and private insurance programs. The groups would also teach clients how to navigate the health-care system, stressing preventive care and disease management. It won committee approval Tuesday and is headed for the House floor.

* Tribune reporter HEATHER MAY contributed to this report.