

After hiatus, state handing out kids' health insurance

Heather May - The Salt Lake Tribune

Tuesday, July 3, 2007

Low-income children who have been in limbo without health insurance got their safety net back this week. On Monday, the state started enrolling children for the state and federally subsidized insurance plan called CHIP, or Children's Health Insurance Program. Due to a lack of funds, the state hasn't been able to offer CHIP to additional children since September.

A one-time \$4 million infusion by the state Legislature this year gave the Utah Department of Health enough money to insure 12,000 more children. In addition, roughly 8,000 new slots are available because existing CHIP enrollees have dropped out.

The state hasn't started heavily promoting CHIP enrollment, but the health department was already reporting increased telephone and Web traffic by Monday afternoon.

"I would say we have increased our calls by 50 percent," said Marie Nagata, who is in charge of the health department's health resources hot line. On a typical day it would normally receive about 50 CHIP-related calls.

Designed for children whose parents make too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to pay for private insurance, CHIP has income requirements. A family of four cannot make more than \$41,300 a year before taxes. Children must be under 19 and U.S. citizens or legal residents.

The health department plans a media blitz - including TV and radio advertisements and a touring van wrapped with a CHIP ad that will travel to every Utah county - beginning next week, and running through the fall to coincide with the start of school.

However, advocates for low-income families suggest they enroll now.

"Because we have high numbers of uninsured children, space could run out quickly," said Judi Hilman, executive director of **Utah Health Policy Project**. "You don't want any delay in care for children."

The latest figures show the number of uninsured children in Utah has jumped 26 percent from 2005 to 2006. While 45,200 children are eligible for CHIP, just 26,000 are currently enrolled.

Hilman is also urging CHIP families to contact Sen. Orrin Hatch. As a senior member of the Senate Finance Committee, Hatch, R-Utah, will play an important role in the reauthorization of the program, which expires Sept. 30.

Low-income advocates across the country want Congress to spend an additional \$50 billion over five years on the program. Hilman noted the amount would give states the flexibility to cover parents.

Hatch, who wants to limit the coverage to children, is working on lowering the figure, noting the total cost would be \$75 billion, said spokeswoman Heather Barney.

"He has some serious concerns with the fact that it doubles the amount Congress has spent on CHIP since it was enacted [in 1997]. He is concerned that bill will have difficulty getting through the Senate," Barney said. "The senator continues to be very, very committed to CHIP and its goals and will work hard to craft this bipartisan compromise bill."

More info

For more information about CHIP, call the state health department hot line, 888-222-2542, or go to www.health.utah.gov/chip/.