

Bills: Open CHIP to legal immigrant children

Health insurance » Children currently must wait 5 years

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Utah children who are legal immigrants should be allowed to enroll in the Children's Health Insurance Program no matter how long they've lived in the U.S., two lawmakers contend.

In similarly worded bills -- SB 225 and HB 171 -- Sen. Luz Robles, D-Salt Lake City, and Rep. Kory Holdaway, R-Taylorsville, seek to take advantage of the federal government's recent reauthorization and expansion of CHIP.

The federal move extends CHIP for more than four years and seeks to cover 4 million more children -- including legal immigrants -- with money from a 61-cent increase in the federal cigarette tax.

But expanding Utah's program requires the state to pass legislation and come up with its share of the cost.

Specifically, the two bills would remove wording in two Utah laws that require legal immigrant children to live in the U.S. for five years before they become eligible for Medicaid or CHIP.

An estimated 70 percent of these children are uninsured, said Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project.

"When you have a population -- and especially children -- that is so likely to be uninsured, and if you're serious about health system reform, this might be one the thing where you bite the bullet and you find the money to do it," she said.

But in a time when the state is facing a significant revenue shortfall, both lawmakers acknowledge that expanding public health programs could be a tough sell.

Any bill with a fiscal note "is getting a lot of scrutiny," Holdaway said.

CHIP receives 80 percent of its funding from the federal government; Utah provides the remaining 20 percent, drawing most of it from the state's tobacco settlement and general fund.

The bills do not yet have a fiscal note. But Hilman said an estimated 800 to 1,300 legally documented children would become eligible, costing the state a projected \$400,000.

"These are families who play by the rules," Hilman said. "So why shouldn't we give them a reasonable shot at cost effective, up-front coverage?"

Robles agreed: "If we really want to move toward having every Utahn insured and move toward accessing quality health care, I think CHIP is a good place to start."

Holdaway hopes having two lawmakers sponsor similar bills will increase the odds of getting one of them passed. Regardless, "I think this is an important enough issue that ... the body needs to at least be aware of an option out there that heretofore we haven't entertained."