

## Health care: You can't give it away

*Heather May The Salt Lake Tribune*

A key part of Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s initial plans to reform health care is to expand enrollment in such programs as Medicaid and CHIP. Advocates like the idea, and it sounds easy enough - but Utah has had little success doing it in the past.

Take CHIP, the Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides low-cost insurance to children from working-class families. Last year the Legislature boosted CHIP funding by \$4 million to cover 12,000 more children. But because families are dropping out of the program in larger numbers than expected, there are 14,500 slots to fill.

Judi Hilman, director of the **Utah Health Policy Project**, said it's going to take a "Herculean" effort to combat the stigma that has equated subsidized health care with welfare in Utah. The two are not connected, she noted.

"We need a whole strategic marketing campaign to put these programs in a more positive light," Hilman said. "These programs are absolutely essential if they [low-income families] are going to become permanently self-sufficient."

Hilman and other advocates for the poor applaud Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s budget, released Monday. It expands eligibility rules for children covered by CHIP and pregnant women and children covered by Medicaid.

For CHIP, the income requirements would change from 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$41,300 for a family of four) to 250 percent (\$51,625 for a family of four).

That expands the pool of eligible children by 11,000, according to 2006 figures.

Hilman said the CHIP change should be a "slam dunk" at the Legislature, but she predicted it won't be. President Bush wants eligibility capped at 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

"It's going to be rough," she said.

The number of potential new Medicaid recipients wasn't readily available Tuesday. But Huntsman proposes changing the income requirement from \$27,464 for a family of four to \$41,300.

"Way to go, Gov. Huntsman," said Jerry Cochran, health policy analyst with Voices for Utah Children. "He's starting in the right place." Cochran provided the state Health Department a list of ways to bolster enrollment in CHIP, such as enrolling children when they apply for free or reduced lunch at school.

Nathan Checketts, the state's CHIP director, said the Health Department is deciding which ideas to pursue. The Health Department has been marketing CHIP, but he acknowledged enrollment isn't as high as expected. Part of the problem is the number of children leaving the program. The Health Department is surveying families to find out why. People have always left, in part because they qualify for private insurance, but the exodus is larger lately. On average, 1,300 children are exiting each month this year, a 46 percent increase over 2005.

### How to recruit

Ideas to enroll more Utah kids in the Children's Health Insurance Program

- \* Require employers to notify their employees about CHIP.
- \* Reward insurance brokers for promoting CHIP.
- \* Partner with Wal-Mart to encourage enrollment.
- \* Require parents to declare at school that their children have insurance or will get it through CHIP.
- \* Remove the Medicaid asset test, which limits the amount of qualified assets a household can have and still be eligible, as 47 other states have done.
- \* Support legislation that provide grants to community-based organizations that would help families enroll.

Source: Voices for Utah Children, **Utah Health Policy Project**

