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Broad support for Governor's children's health bill

Leaders of the state's three children's hospitals to testify in support of Senate Bill 5093 before Senate health committee on Monday, January 22

January 18, 2007 (Seattle) – Governor Chris Gregoire's plan for expanding health coverage to tens of thousands of additional children is drawing the support of organizations across Washington that know providing coverage options to all children will ensure a healthier future for everyone in Washington. (A position paper with the list of orgs. is attached.)

"Health coverage is the foundation for a healthier and more successful future for children in our state," said Jon Gould, Deputy Director of the Children's Alliance. **"Everybody benefits when our children are healthier and more successful in school."**

The Governor's comprehensive children's health care bill will take the state far toward the goal of covering all children by 2010. Washington is not alone in trying to find creative ways to ensure health coverage for all children. States like California and Illinois have proposed or implemented such plans, and the issue is being discussed at the national level as well.

*Washington's legislation is moving quickly, and bills in both the Senate (SB 5093) and the House (HB 1071) will likely move out of policy committees and to the financial committees within the next two weeks, where lawmakers will examine the financial details. **The next hearing will be on Senate Bill 5093 on Monday, January 22nd, at 1:30 pm in Senate Hearing Room 4, Cherberg Building.***

The legislation includes:

- Expansion of federal- and state-supported health insurance for children living in families up to 250% of the Federal Poverty Level, with cost-sharing above 200% FPL. This expansion places the responsibility on parents to make sure their children are covered and is expected to cover an additional 32,000 children.

- Outreach funds to ensure that the parents of approximately 50,000 children currently eligible for insurance have the information to get signed up.
- Increased reimbursement rates for pediatricians so that children with publicly supported insurance can get in to see a doctor.
- Performance standards that provide financial incentives for evidence-based quality outcomes.
- Nutrition and exercise goals for schools and education about health choices.
- Establishment of “medical homes” for children, which are doctor’s offices where children and their family are known, medical care is well-coordinated, and developmental screenings are completed and followed through on.

The plan would cost just over \$30 million in state funds, with an additional \$30 million coming from the federal government.

“As the president of the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I know that I speak for all the pediatricians in the state in supporting this important effort by the Governor to provide insurance for all of Washington's children,” said Dr. Chris Olson of Spokane.

The Governor’s plan to expand coverage options for low-income families includes making public insurance available to undocumented children living in Washington whose family incomes are at or below 250% of the Federal Poverty Level (currently \$50,000 for a family of four.) This element is strongly supported by the 33 organizations formally signed on in support of the plan—for financial, public health and humanitarian reasons.

“When we say every child should have health coverage, we mean every child,” Gould said.

Covering this group of children also makes sound fiscal sense, noted Cassie Sauer, a spokesperson for the Washington State Hospitals Association: “We’re already paying for uninsured children – including uninsured immigrant children – to get medical care. But, we’re paying for the most expensive care available: critical care in the emergency room and hospital stays for conditions that have gotten out of control. **It doesn’t make any sense to treat children in emergency rooms when we can do it in the doctor’s office, saving both tax payer dollars and children’s lives.**”

Hospital data in Washington State show that the average cost of a hospitalization for a preventable condition such as an earache is enough to cover a child in Medicaid for two years.

“Community clinics and other primary care providers know first hand that uninsured children are much less likely to come in for the preventive services that every child needs, including immunizations and well child checks,” said Rebecca Kavoussi, Director of Public Policy for the Community Health Network of Washington.

Lack of health coverage and regular health care harms students and their classmates alike. As the Institutes of Medicine noted in the 2002 report “Insuring Health,” a child in poor health cannot learn, and classmates suffer as well. Illness takes away from teaching time and learning time. Meanwhile the child may well be suffering needlessly as well as being at increased risk of falling behind.

“We have the opportunity to join the ranks of states that are finding innovative and fiscally effective ways to make sure no child goes without health coverage and regular medical care,” said Gould of the Children’s Alliance. “We shouldn’t miss this opportunity to make a real difference in the next generation, the state’s 1.4 million children.”

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For more than twenty years, the Children’s Alliance has advocated for children, youth and families in Washington. The Alliance has 128 organizational members, and more than 7,000 individual members statewide. To learn more about the Children’s Alliance, go to: www.childrensalliance.org