

Johnson Family, Kent

health care costs are breaking the budget

Five-year-old Tony Johnson has never had health coverage. His mother, Paula, has managed to get him and his four older siblings all their immunizations thanks to mobile vans offering free shots, but the Kent family can't afford well-child visits or dental check-ups for the children.

Paula's husband, Ron, is a mechanic who works for a small, family-owned business that doesn't provide health coverage for their employees, let alone their employees' families. He gets only a \$150-per-paycheck stipend intended to help cover health insurance. But it isn't enough to buy coverage, so instead the Johnsons put it toward paying bills. "We go payday to payday," Paula said.

Paula has pestered her husband's employer about getting health coverage for the children. They recently offered insurance that would cost the family \$800 a month for minimal coverage. The Johnsons don't have that money.

Mostly the children have been healthy. But three years ago Tony and his sister Grace, who was then six, were hospitalized for pneumonia. That meant a \$16,000 bill. Luckily, a nurse who knew the family arranged for the hospital to cover the bill as charity care.

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Even so, the family owes thousands of dollars in medical bills, from an ear infection here, a fever there. "When you need it you need it," says Paula. She makes payments every month, but sometimes the bills go to collections.

So when Paula Johnson learned that the state's health program for children, Apple Health, would be expanding at the beginning of this year to include children in families like hers—with incomes between 250 and 300 percent of the poverty level—she was thrilled. She applied and shortly before Christmas learned her children would soon be enrolled in comprehensive coverage. "Finally, after all these years—I was so excited," she said. "I was ready to book all these appointments."

But then came the cruel news that because of budget cuts the program had been suspended. "I just about cried," Paula said.