

# The Dallas Morning News

## Fewer kids in CHIP should be good news

**MARY KATHERINE STOUT** says declining insurance rolls point to strong economy

Only in Austin can news of declining caseloads for government assistance programs be met with disappointment.

Hardworking taxpayers may suffer under the illusion that government assistance programs are a temporary safety net, but the outcry among liberals when people move off the rolls belies this notion. In reality, the left's goal is to enroll people in programs with the expectation — even the hope — that they will never move off the rolls.

Declines in the state's Children's Health Insurance Program rolls are the latest case in point. For weeks, news reports have decried CHIP declines, usually leveling the blame at new call centers that use a private vendor to help facilitate enrollment and renewal of benefits. These call centers are a convenient whipping boy for those who have had the privatization effort in their crosshairs. Their case, however, is built

on the presumption that there should never be a decline in caseload.

This is emblematic of a startling difference in worldview: one expects and celebrates reliance on government, while the other emphasizes personal responsibility and temporary assistance through private means. This distinction may not be polite, but it must be made.

Before Texans become convinced that the decline in CHIP enrollment is due to heartless conservatives, draconian public policy or a privatization effort gone awry, Texans deserve a more thoughtful look at the many factors that contribute to these changes.

Think back to 2003 when the state faced a budget shortfall in the midst of a slowed national economy. Advocates for the poor claimed that enrollment in government programs was counter-cyclical: that enrollment increases in slowed economies and thus demanded more of the already scarce resources. Their point only holds up when it serves as justification for higher spending and ballooning enrollment.

In reality, the poor economy gets the blame when caseloads rise, but an improved economy rarely gets the credit

when caseloads decline.

In fact, the Texas economy is strong and growing stronger, doubtlessly improving the lives of thousands of Texas families. The Texas Workforce Commission reported that February 2006 was the 17th consecutive month of job growth, adding 25,400 jobs in the state — for an increase of almost 280,000 jobs over the year. A year ago, the state's unemployment rate was 5.4 percent, which dropped to 5.2 by December, and has fallen again to only 5 percent in January and February 2006. The commission reported that initial claims for unemployment compensation were down by almost 20 percent over the last 12 months.

These increases in employment are not just a positive trend in the labor market. They have a ripple effect throughout government programs. Employment gains may result in increases in a family's income, as well as access to employer-provided or employer-subsidized health insurance.

What's more, total enrollment only tells part of the story.

According to figures posted on the Texas Health and Human Services

Commission's Web site, there were almost 29,500 new CHIP enrollees for April — the highest number of new enrollees in any month since January 2003. Even as some families have left the rolls entirely, fueling the recent decline in total enrollment, the number of new enrollees clearly indicates that new families are making use of the program when they need it.

And what to make of those families leaving CHIP? In almost every month over the last four and a half years, data from the state indicate that the most common reason for leaving CHIP is simply the failure to re-enroll. Second is the determination that a child's family is no longer eligible for the program.

Both are legitimate reasons and undercut the rhetoric that suggests heartless policies or processes are to blame.



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