

State is easing Medicaid filing

Databases can be used to confirm citizenship for plan, starting today

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By ROBERT T. GARRETT / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Texas will take a low-cost, no-muss approach to making sure the 2.7 million poor people on its Medicaid rolls are legal U.S. residents.

Starting today, states must make new applicants and current Medicaid recipients produce documents showing they are citizens. Legal immigrants already are required to document they are here legally.

The law, signed by President Bush in February, targets illegal immigrants who aren't eligible for the state-federal health program for the poor, elderly and disabled.

Though federal Medicaid officials recently sought to impose stricter, more costly standards for verifying citizenship, Texas will proceed with plans to relieve most people from having to provide documents. Instead, the state will tap into existing electronic databases.

"We wanted to make it as simple as possible for clients," said Health and Human Services Commission spokeswoman Stephanie Goodman.

The state expects most of the 1.8 million children on Medicaid to be verified as citizens through electronic state birth records.

It likewise plans to tap into the Social Security Administration database to obtain electronic verification of citizenship or legal immigration status for the 700,000 elderly and disabled Medicaid recipients in Texas. Most previously showed they are here legally when they qualified for federal Medicare and disability benefits.

The state will offer a six-month grace period to what's expected to be a small percentage of remaining current recipients – those not listed in the birth certificate and Social Security databases and who have trouble finding needed documents.

Texas backed off plans to grant new applicants the same grace period after federal officials June 9 said they "should not be made eligible until they have presented the required evidence."

Many states have objected to the federal guidelines.

In Austin, health policy analysts for conservative and liberal advocacy groups praised Texas officials Friday for showing an independent streak – and not heaping unnecessary burdens on recipients.

"There was some concern that this could end up being a burden on individuals if they didn't have enough lead time," said Mary Katherine Stout of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which advocates limited government and free-market solutions. "It's really very encouraging that the state is taking steps to minimize that as much as possible."

Ms. Stout and Anne Dunkelberg, assistant director of the progressive Center for Public Policy Priorities, said the state's use of existing databases is thrifty and wise.

"I'd give them an 'A,' " said Ms. Dunkelberg, a former state Medicaid official.

However, she said she's disappointed that new applicants won't get the grace period.

Some could urgently need medical treatment, but care would "be delayed indefinitely while they try to get a birth certificate from Idaho or Louisiana or wherever," Ms. Dunkelberg said.

Health and Human Services Commissioner Albert Hawkins said Texas did what it could "for our clients while fully satisfying the new requirement."

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