

Houston & Texas News

Oct. 12, 2007, 12:01AM

Child health cuts unlikely in Texas

Funds sufficient even if Congress can't reach deal, state officials say

By JANET ELLIOTT
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AUSTIN — Texas is unlikely to face cutbacks in its Children's Health Insurance Program even if Congress cannot reach a compromise on funding this year.

State officials said Thursday that the state has sufficient funding from existing federal grants to continue the program for at least a year.

Stephanie Goodman, a spokeswoman for the Health and Human Services Commission, said there is enough money to cover an expected enrollment increase of 135,000 children. The boost in enrollment was authorized by the Legislature this year in a bill designed to reverse cuts made in 2003 when the state faced a budget crisis.

Goodman said eligibility workers are reassuring families that they won't lose CHIP. The situation is different in some other states that have spent all of their federal funds.

The federal government provides more than \$2 in matching funds for every dollar the state spends on CHIP, which is designed for children of families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private insurance. Texas covers children living in families who earn up to 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines, or \$41,300 for a family of four.

Enrollment down

About 327,000 Texas children are enrolled now, down from 529,000 in 2002.

Advocates for low-income families said a congressional deadlock could hurt future efforts to cover more uninsured children in Texas by expanding income limits. Such changes would have to be made by the Legislature.

Anne Dunkelberg, associate director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, said if Texas wants to reach the more than 300,000 children eligible for the program but not enrolled and continue covering pregnant women, it will need to rely on more federal funds in coming years. She said the bill that President Bush vetoed last week would have provided those funds.

"This veto handcuffs Texas' ability to continue to reduce the number of uninsured children in our state," said state Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston.

A free-market group said Bush's veto was appropriate. Mary Katherine Stout, vice president of policy for The Texas Public Policy Foundation, said continued expansion of government health insurance is "the wrong direction to go."

"Ultimately you have limited resources, and the only way to be able to deliver care is to ration and cut costs," Stout said.

The federal reauthorization bill would continue the program for five years. But its \$35 billion expansion was deemed too expensive by members of the Texas congressional delegation who voted against it.

Cornyn criticizes ads

On Thursday, Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, urged Democratic leaders to continue negotiating. He also criticized ads by liberal advocacy groups attacking those who voted against the bill.

"I am troubled by the appearance that your refusal to negotiate is motivated more by partisan politics, with an eye toward next year's election, instead of a sincere desire to reach a bipartisan compromise," said Cornyn in a letter to Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Reid, D-Nevada, said the bill that passed the Senate was a compromise. "You cannot wring another ounce of compromise out of this," he said.

The House has scheduled a vote Thursday to try and override the veto. Democrats have contrasted the cost of the popular health insurance program with the unpopular war in Iraq.

"We are still continuing our efforts to try to override that veto. At the same time that the president is saying that we really can't afford to insure those 10 million children, he is asking for a \$200 billion supplemental for Iraq," Pelosi, D-California, said at a news conference Thursday.

Washington Bureau reporter Michelle Mittelstadt contributed to this report.

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Cornyn said, ""I am troubled by the appearance that your refusal to negotiate is motivated more by partisan politics, with an eye toward next year's election, instead of a sincere desire to reach a bipartisan compromise,""

BUUUUUAAAAAAHHHHHHHHAAAAAAA! Cornyn decrying partisan politics! What? The master of gotcha politics is going after Reid about being partisan? Now THAT'S funny.

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