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Attorney general proposes health insurance program for kids in child support system

200,000 uninsured children could be eligible

By [Corrie MacLaggan](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott on Wednesday proposed a health insurance program to cover uninsured children in the state's child support system.

He said the program, which would provide private insurance, is designed for the 200,000 children in the system who don't have coverage through their parents' jobs or government programs.

"This idea addresses a pressing need for children in Texas in a way that keeps a watchful eye on taxpayer dollars," said Abbott, who outlined the program in Austin at the Texas Public Policy Foundation's annual Policy Orientation for the Texas Legislature.

The conference, which continues today, gathers lawmakers, Capitol staffers and policy experts to discuss issues facing the state.

A spokeswoman for Abbott said she was not aware of other states with similar health insurance programs.

Abbott's proposal is the latest attempt to reduce the ranks of the 5.5 million uninsured Texans.

Health and Human Services Executive Commissioner Albert Hawkins said last month that the state took its first step in seeking federal approval to start another program to help low-income, uninsured Texans pay for health insurance.

The first to benefit could be the nearly half-million uninsured parents of children enrolled in Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Parents could apply for subsidies to help pay for health insurance.

Abbott's proposal would require legislative changes. Several lawmakers and policy experts at the conference said the plan sounds like a good way to reduce the number of uninsured but said they'd need more details to fully evaluate it. Abbott did not give a cost estimate for the program.

Here's what he envisions:

A private insurance company would contract with the state to cover a pool of children.

A court could order parents to buy the private insurance based on their ability to pay. The court could order the insurance premiums withheld from a parent's paycheck.

Parents who provide proof of insurance could opt out.

"I think it's great for the attorney general as part of his effort to increase child support collection to also talk about how you can meet the various needs for the children," said Mary Katherine Stout, vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports limited government.

Federal and state laws already require noncustodial parents to meet their children's health insurance needs, Abbott said. "We are not talking about a new responsibility but a new mechanism to ensure more parents meet their obligation."

About 1.2 million children are in the state's child support system.

Not all Texas children whose parents pay child support are in that system, said Janecé Rolfe, a spokeswoman for Abbott. The state tracks families who apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and those who ask for help setting, enforcing or modifying a child support order, Rolfe said.

State Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, said she might prefer a public-private partnership rather than the private insurance Abbott proposed. "I'm intrigued to learn more," she said. "Obviously, anything we can do to get all the kids covered, we should do."

Anne Dunkelberg, associate director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, said that to save the state money and to avoid confusing layers of administration, Abbott's program should rely on the structure of the Children's Health Insurance Program. Her group works for low- and middle-income Texans.


Essentially, she suggested, the CHIP program could expand to allow families in the child-support system who are above the CHIP income limit (\$41,300 for a family of four) to buy in to the program.

"There's no reason this program could not piggyback on the CHIP system," she said.

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