



## Children's health insurance expansion sought

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AUSTIN — Last year's legislation to increase the number of children who get low-cost state health insurance has had the desired effect, with 109,000 more children enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program in eight months.

Two legislators who fought for those changes are now turning their attention to the 1.5 million Texas children who still lack health insurance. They joined a Houston businessman and families struggling with health coverage at a news conference Tuesday at the Capitol.

"Texas has the highest rate of uninsured children, and that is absolutely abominable," said Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo.

Zaffirini and Rep. Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, called for lawmakers to expand eligibility for the program. The majority of the 1.5 million children not covered are eligible but not enrolled in CHIP or children's Medicaid.

The families of about one-third earn too much to qualify for government insurance but not enough to afford private insurance, advocates said.

But backers of limits on government spending said lawmakers should instead be looking at ways to expand the private insurance market so costs come down.

Mary Katherine Stout, vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said congressional budget studies have shown that expanding CHIP, a joint federal-state program, siphons people away from private coverage and distorts the market.

"The crowd-out effect is predictable, and it is unfortunate as it drains children from private coverage that often provides them much better access to providers, not to mention the benefits of some stability in coverage," Stout said.

Kyla Hebert of Houston said her family of four earns too much to qualify for CHIP but is not able to afford employer-sponsored health insurance.

The upper income limit for CHIP is about \$42,000 for a family of four.

Hebert said the insurance offered through her husband's job as network administrator for a bank would cost \$938 a month, about 30 percent of the family's income. And the insurance would not cover all the specialists needed by their 3-year-old daughter, who suffers from seizures and eating disorders, Hebert said.

Hebert's family makes \$260 a month over the CHIP income limits, and her husband is considering asking for a pay cut so the family can qualify.

"We are willing and able to pay for our coverage, we just need to be given a real opportunity to do so," she said.

Lawmakers in 2007 came together on a bipartisan bill that expanded CHIP, which had been plagued by declining rolls since lawmakers tightened eligibility four years ago. They allowed families to retain coverage for one year without reapplying and made other changes to eligibility rules to allow more families to qualify.

Zaffirini said children's Medicaid, which covers the poorest Texas families, should be expanded by allowing families to retain coverage for 12 months, instead of having to reapply every six months.

"It is expensive but it's an investment because it insures prevention (care)," she said.

Greater community outreach, enhanced help for families to complete program applications and a better computer system to process the benefits also are matters that deserve legislative attention next year, Zaffirini said.

Also Tuesday, the Texas Insurance Department issued a news release urging consumers to use an online tool to shop for health coverage.

Information at [www.TexasHealthOptions.com](http://www.TexasHealthOptions.com) is organized into eight sections dedicated to parents, college students, individuals, seniors, the unemployed, people with medical conditions, small employers and larger employers.

*Houston Chronicle Staff Writer Janet Elliott reports from the Austin Bureau.*

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