

ARKids proposal gets resounding House OK

BY CHARLIE FRAGO AND MICHAEL R. WICKLINE

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The Arkansas House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved Monday legislation to expand the ARKids First Medicaid program to cover 8,000 more children.

The 82-14 vote sending House Bill 1700 to the Senate occurred after its sponsor, Rep. Robert Moore, D-Arkansas City, said health-care costs over the past several years have outstripped wage increases by "four or five times," making the measure necessary for working families.

"This is not only to [ensure] our children are insured but also is a program to help provide stability in our working families that find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet with the increasing costs of health care," Moore said.

Republican Mark Martin of Prairie Grove - the only representative to speak against the bill - said raising the income eligibility from 200 percent to 250 percent of the federal poverty level would take state dollars away from more worthy programs in a cash-strapped economic climate.

"We have to ask ourselves whether it's the most appropriate place to spend the money," Martin said.

For a family of four, the 2009 maximum income to qualify for ARKids is \$44,100. That would increase to \$55,125 under the proposal. The median income for a four-person family in Arkansas is \$52,217, according to the U.S Census Bureau.

The program - created in 1997 - insures nearly 80,000 children whose families make up to 200 percent of the federal poverty limit. About 260,000 more children whose family income doesn't exceed the poverty limit are also covered, state Department of Human Services officials have said.

Children must be without health insurance for at least six months to qualify, officials have said.

About 69,000 children are uninsured in Arkansas, including 23,000 under the poverty line, advocates have estimated.

Moore said news of the expansion would help enroll more children who already qualify by raising awareness, raising total new enrollees to about 20,000.

If expanded, the program would cost an estimated \$53 million over the next two years. The state's share would be \$9.6 million. The money would come from the increase in

tobacco taxes signed into law earlier this year, Moore said.

DEFIBRILLATORS

In another health-related move, the Senate, meanwhile, approved and sent to the House a bill that would require the state Board of Education to issue rules mandating each school campus have an automated external defibrillator. The Senate voted 33-0 to approve Senate Bill 312 by Sen. Tracy Steele, D-North Little Rock. It's named "The Antony Hobbs III Act," after a Little Rock Parkview basketball player who died in January 1998 after he collapsed during a game and his heart stopped, Steele said. A defibrillator was needed, but one wasn't available on the school's campus, he said.

Under the bill, each school district may apply for a grant from the state Department of Health to purchase an automated external defibrillator or related equipment or to provide training to its employees, or any combination of that. About \$1 million from the \$86 million tax increase on cigarettes and other tobacco enacted earlier this year will be used for this purpose, Steele said.

The defibrillators will give people who go into cardiac arrest "a fighting chance," he said.

The Senate also voted 29-1 to pass Senate Bill 582 by Sen. Larry Teague, D-Nashville, which would assess a fee on hospitals to raise Medicaid matching funds.

The fee would be up to 1 percent of net patient revenue. Hospitals that are not privately operated, licensed by the Department of Health as rehabilitation hospitals and specialty hospitals would be exempt from the fee.

Teague said about 83 hospitals would pay the fee, which would raise about \$40 million at 1 percent of net patient revenue. That money could be used to draw \$107 million in federal dollars, said Julie Munsell, a spokesman for the state Department of Human Services.

Teague said the funds would help offset hospitals' losses on Medicaid reimbursements.

PRISON GOODS

The House passed a bill that would give employees of public schools and state agencies the right to buy prison-made goods, including T-shirts and hibachi grills.

A previous proposal to include state senators and representatives as purchasers was eliminated, said Rep. Rick Saunders, D-Hot Springs, to satisfy lawmakers who rejected his previous attempt by 71 votes last month.

Furniture makers are also satisfied after the sale of furniture was taken out of the legislation, he said.

House Bill 1420 passed 77-12 and goes to the Senate.

FEE DETERMINATION

A bill that would allow the state Claims Commissions to determine if attorney fees should be awarded in successful Freedom of Information Act cases brought against state agencies won approval by a wide margin.

House Bill 1326 by Rep. Lindsley Smith, D-Fayetteville, passed 98-0, and is headed to the Senate.

Rep. John Edwards, D-Little Rock, the bill's co-sponsor, said HB1236 helps the common man.

Smith said she's fought for a bill that would award attorney fees in successful Freedom of Information Act actions after learning about David Harris, a retired Air Force veteran, who spent \$10,000 in legal fees in a 2002 lawsuit against the city of Fort Smith.

In that case, which Harris won at the Supreme Court level, the city manager had polled members of the City Council about bidding on a piece of property without holding a public meeting.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that Harris wasn't entitled to attorney fees because, in accordance with state law, the city was "substantially justified" in trying to save taxpayer dollars by keeping the information secret.

TOUGHMAN

Rep. Steve Harrelson, D-Texarkana, said placing mixed martial arts competitions like Toughman under the supervision of the state Athletic Commission would reduce the odds of injury or death.

His House Bill 1785 originated after a Texarkana-area man died in a 2008 Toughman competition held in that city, Harrelson said.

The legislation would allow the commission to create rules that would require promoters to offer insurance, staff events with qualified medical personnel and referees, and require drug and alcohol testing of fighters, he said.

HB1785 passed 97-1 and goes to the Senate.

ROCK 'N' ROLL

Another less-violent type of entertainment also occupied lawmakers, as they voted 96-1 to designate a portion of U.S. 67 as "Rock 'N' Roll Highway 67."

House Bill 1837 by Rep. J.R. Rogers, D-Walnut Ridge, would honor the heritage of early rockers like Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison and Carl Perkins who performed along the highway in Jackson, Lawrence and Randolph counties in the 1950s.

Rogers said the designation would draw tourists to the area and give local music festivals a boost.

"Memphis has capitalized ... on music," Rogers said, adding cities like Newport,

Pocahontas and Walnut Ridge could follow suit.

OTHER SENATE ACTION

In other business, the Senate approved:

Senate Bill 441 by Sen. Gilbert Baker, R-Conway, to require candidates to disclose their loans to their campaigns on the first page of their campaign finance reports.

The bill goes to the House.

House Bill 1424 by Rep. Kathy Webb, D-Little Rock, which would require tougher regulations Friday on land used to dispose of discarded water and rock sediment generated by natural gas drilling. Webb has said the legislation will require "land farms" to have adequate financing to guarantee environmental safeguards when their owners close the large, plastic-lined ponds that may cover several acres.

The bill goes to the governor.

House Bill 1551 by Rep. Allen Maxwell, D-Monticello, which would create a 19-member Arkansas Blue Ribbon Committee on Highway Finance. The committee would be charged with defining "an equitable and adequate system to properly finance improvements to the systems of state highways, county roads, and city streets within the state," and proposing and recommending legislation for the 2011 regular session of the General Assembly.

The bill goes to the governor.