



Posted on Tue, Nov. 03, 2009

Ky. increases number of kids in health programs

By Beth Musgrave
bmusgrave@herald-leader.com

FRANKFORT —State officials said Monday that they are on target to enroll 35,000 children in two key public health programs by the end of 2009, six months ahead of schedule.

In November 2008, Gov. Steve Beshear pledged to increase the number of children in Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program or Medicaid programs by decreasing some of the road blocks to the government health insurance program for low-income families.

Currently, there are 32,000 new children enrolled in the two programs, Beshear said at a press conference Monday at Second Street School in Frankfort. But both programs combined have enrolled on average 2,600 children a month. Current rates indicate that the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, which oversees the health insurance programs, will meet the 35,000 goal by December instead of June 2010, as originally projected.

The KCHIP program was designed to provide health insurance to children whose parents made too much money to qualify for Medicaid. It provides insurance to families whose income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$44,100 a year for a family of four. Medicaid's income eligibility guidelines are lower.

Cabinet officials said that most of the increase in new enrollees over the past year has been in the state's Medicaid program.

Beshear credited a push by the cabinet and various community groups to increase awareness and also increase training for health care and other professionals who may come in contact with families who do not have health insurance. Applications for the programs are now available online and, more importantly, families who apply no longer have to have face-to-face interviews to apply.

But Beshear noted that the economic downturn also contributed to the up-tick in the number of new children in the program.

"The state of our economy is reflected in these new numbers," Beshear said. "Many Kentuckians are losing their jobs and some are losing their homes. Access to quality, affordable health care is increasingly becoming a concern to families all across this Commonwealth.

Janie Miller, Secretary for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, said the increase in the number of children in the health insurance programs has cost the state about \$19 million. Most of the cost of the two programs is paid for by the federal government.

"We were able to absorb the cost in our existing budget," Miller said. The state also received an increase in its Medicaid funding because of Kentucky's high unemployment rate. Those additional dollars will help defray some of the costs, Miller said.

Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, a nonprofit based in Louisville, said social service groups had pushed for years for the cabinet to drop the requirement of in-person interviews because too many working families didn't have time for them. The Beshear administration finally listened, Brooks said. As a result, more Kentucky children have health insurance than last year.

"You would have to line up 600 school buses to fit in all the new enrollees," Brooks said.