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## State steps up health care coverage for kids

WASHINGTON -- Alabama's successful efforts to increase the number of children with health care coverage has made it a standout in the region, according to a national study released Wednesday.

The study by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured lists Alabama among four states that are regional leaders in making gains in children's health care. The others are Iowa, Massachusetts and Oregon.

Alabama recognizes the importance of health care coverage for kids, said Trisha Brooks, a co-author of the report and a senior fellow at the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families.

"There definitely are things Alabama has sort of quietly been a leader on," Brooks said.

Alabama health officials said they have been working for years to provide health care coverage to more children.

"It's not news to us," said Jim McVay, director of the Bureau of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease at the Alabama Department of Public Health. "(But) it's always nice to take a larger view of what's going on in our state and in the nation."

Last December, Alabama received a \$19.8 million performance bonus from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

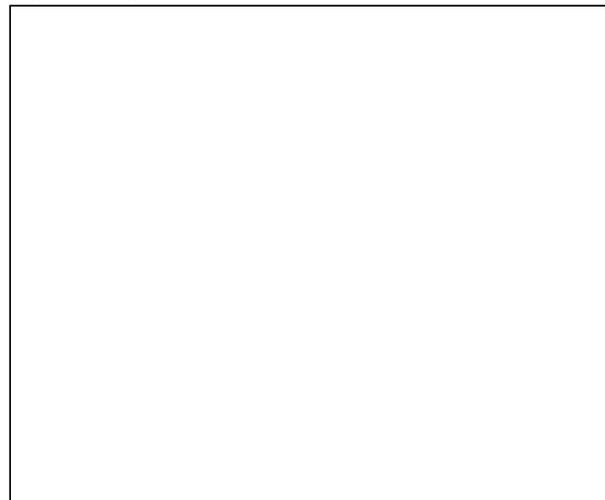
The Kaiser report noted that Alabama has simplified enrollment in its children's health insurance program, called All Kids, and in Medicaid, the federal-state health insurance program for low-income children and families.

The state has reduced paperwork, utilized technology and improved coordination between programs, the report said.

Alabama was among the first states to provide online applications to renew coverage and allow electronic signatures, according to the report. It also verifies eligibility, including citizenship, electronically.

In addition, Alabama is the only state in the South to provide health care coverage to children in families with incomes up to 300 percent of the poverty level, or \$55,590

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for a family of three, according to the report.

Many states provide coverage to children in families with incomes up to 250 percent of poverty, or \$46,325 for a family of three.

The number of uninsured children in Alabama dropped 21.6 percent between 2008 and 2010, the report said, citing outreach as a key factor.

The state is divided into 11 areas with outreach coordinators working with medical providers, community groups and the public "to get the information out and try to make it as easy as possible to apply," McVay said.

Brooks said outreach efforts were still under way in 2003 when the state temporarily froze enrollment.

"Alabama has never stopped doing outreach," she said.

She also pointed to support from Alabama lawmakers to enroll more children.

"There's been a lot of affinity for (providing) kid coverage in a very poor state," she said.

McVay said the programs have been popular in the past. But he's concerned they are vulnerable, as they are in other states facing tough financial circumstances.

"Everyone has to be conscious about the economic downturn," he said. "Any

program is going to be looked at."

In a separate survey, Kaiser also found that 29 states expanded or simplified enrollment in CHIP and Medicaid programs, despite the weak economy.

Extra federal funding helped many states improve programs and prepare to implement provisions in the 2010 health care reform law.

The continued progress in insuring children "provides a roadmap" for the new law, said Cindy Mann, director of the Center for Medicaid, CHIP and Survey and Certification at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

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