

Safety-net programs insure more Texas children

By TODD ACKERMAN, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Updated 09:58 p.m., Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Houston-area children's health insurance is increasingly being provided by government safety-net programs as employers cut jobs and benefits, according to a new study.

The survey, sponsored by Texas Children's Hospital, found that in the last three years, area children's enrollment in Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program doubled as coverage through work-based plans decreased significantly. This shift comes in a state known for not embracing government health programs.

"Part of it is the economy," said Richard Batsell, a Rice University management professor who conducted the survey. "But I wonder if part of it is unintended causes of the new health care legislation - insurance companies feeling that because there's more of a government option, they no longer have to provide certain coverage."

Batsell said the most common explanation from uninsured survey participants was that they couldn't afford coverage.

Based on the survey, Texas Children's estimated that 400,000 Houston children lost coverage through their family's work options from 2008 to 2011.

It is unknown how many of those enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP, but Batsell noted the percentage of area households with uninsured children rose in the period, from 6.5 percent to 9.3 percent.

Possible explanation

The shift toward government safety-net programs mirrors a state and national trend.

The Center for Children and Families reported Tuesday that the number of uninsured children decreased from 6.9 million in 2008 to 5.9 million in 2010 due to Medicaid and CHIP. Houston notwithstanding, the number in Texas decreased from 1.14 million to just under a million.

Batsell suggested that Houston's status as an immigrant magnet may be a factor in rates of uninsured children rising here while the numbers declined in the state and nation.

Local children's advocacy leaders said safety-net coverage of Houston children should continue to grow if health-care reform goes into effect as scheduled in 2014.

Although the federal legislation will mostly benefit uninsured adults, the leaders said it likely would also add hundreds of thousands of uninsured Texas children to Medicaid and CHIP.

They estimated about 500,000 Texas children currently are eligible for CHIP or Medicaid but not enrolled in either program.

Nevertheless, Texas children are twice as likely to be insured as adults. About 2.5 million Texas children are on Medicaid and about 550,000 Texas children are enrolled in CHIP, according to the latest census data. There are 225,000 Texas adults on Medicaid.

Survey results

The Houston numbers, according to the Texas Children's survey:

57.8 percent of insured households' children were covered through work-based plans in 2011, down from 74 percent in 2008.

35.1 percent were covered through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance program in 2011, up from 16.5 percent in 2008.

71 percent of households where at least one parent worked had the option of buying a company health plan covering dependents in 2011, down from 76 percent in 2008.

Local children's advocacy leaders said the shift toward safety-net coverage shows the value of CHIP and Medicaid at a time of high unemployment and childhood poverty rates. They warned against calls from some state or national leaders to cut such programs.

Doctors opting out

The head of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation said the change is reflective of a tough economy and a broken health care system that needs reforming.

The increase in safety-net coverage doesn't necessarily ensure care for all such patients. A 2010 Texas Medical Association survey of pediatricians found nearly a quarter accepted no Medicaid or CHIP patients and between 26 and 30 percent limited such patients.

Batsell's research team conducted random telephone interviews with 700 adults with at least one child in 12 Houston-area counties, about 70 percent in Harris County, in 2003, 2006, 2008 and 2011.

The survey has a margin of error range of plus or minus 2.5 percent to 3.8 percentage points.

todd.ackerman@chron.com

Affordable Housing

Find Info On Affordable Housing. We Will Help You Decide
FreshDeals.com

Rent To Own Homes Program

Hate Renting? Bad Credit? Call Us!
Rent To Own Homes
HomeBuyersAssistant.Com

Texas Longhorns Store

Buy Texas Longhorns Gear Here!
Save \$10 on Orders Over \$50
Longhorn.Fanatics.com

Ads by Yahoo!

CHRON.COM

Home
Houston & Texas
Nation & World
Business
Sports
Entertainment
Life
Corrections
Blogs
Weather

City Brights

Traffic

TOPICS

Small Business
MomHouston.com
HoustonBelief.com
29-95.com

NEIGHBORHOODS

Aldine
Alief
Baytown
Bellaire
Clear Lake
Conroe
Cy-Fair
East End
Fort Bend
Heights
Katy

Kingwood

Lake Houston
Magnolia
Memorial
Montrose
Pasadena
Pearland
Spring
Tomball
West U
The Woodlands

MARKETPLACE

Jobs
Homes
Cars
Coupons
Classifieds
Place a classified ad
Place a retail ad
OTHER EDITIONS
Home Delivery
iPad
iPhone
Android
Mobile
RSS Feeds
e-Edition

LOCAL SERVICES

Air Conditioning
Contractors in Houston
Car Dealerships in Houston
Cleaning Services in Houston
Family Doctors in Houston
Furniture Stores in Houston
Injury Attorneys in Houston
New Car Dealer in Houston
Real Estate Agents in Houston
Real Estate Attorneys in Houston
Restaurants in Houston

SERVICES

Help/Contact us
Business directory
Legal notices
Privacy policy
Terms & Conditions
Employment opportunities
Advertise with us
Buy a banner ad

© 2011 Hearst Communications Inc.

HEARST newspapers