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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)

September 16, 2009 Wednesday

HEALTH NOTEBOOK Growth seen in kid-insurance programs

BYLINE: JANE FULLERTON ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE**SECTION:** FRONT SECTION**LENGTH:** 567 words

A study released Tuesday, showing many states have maintained or expanded children's health coverage despite the economic recession, cited an Arkansas family whose youngsters receive care through **ARKids** First.

James and Rachel Simpson of Benton were already having a difficult time making ends meet when James Simpson was laid off from his job as an electrician, according to the report by the Center for Children and Families at Georgetown University's Health Policy Institute.

Even when he had a job, the family couldn't afford \$400 in monthly premiums for employer-sponsored coverage. "We would have had to decide to either pay the light bill or to eat groceries - or pay the light bill, eat groceries and not pay the rent," Rachel Simpson said, according to the study.

But their three children - aged 7, 8 and 18 - receive health coverage through the **ARKids** program, Arkansas' public children's coverage program.

The report found a majority of states have used the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) Reauthorization Act and other federal support to boost children's health coverage. Twenty-three states - including Arkansas - improved or expanded their Medicaid or CHIP programs, such as **ARKids**.

In March the General Assembly passed and Governor Mike Beebe signed the **ARKids** First expansion, which could add about 20,000 children to the health insurance program. The state's share of the \$6 million cost will come from the tax increase on cigarettes and tobacco passed earlier this year.

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