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Kids' health bill faces tough time
[By ED SEALOVER THE GAZETTE](#)

DENVER - Despite being one of the priciest bills of the session, a proposal to offer health insurance to about 180,000 Colorado children who lack coverage got bipartisan support Wednesday in a Senate committee.

Senate Bill 211 would raise the income limits for kids to receive coverage under the Medicaid and Children's Basic Health Plan programs. It also would fund a team of state workers to find families eligible for those government-assistance programs and enroll them, and it creates a committee to determine how to reach all uninsured children.

The proposal by Sen. Bob Hagedorn, D-Aurora, carries a \$13.2 million price tag for next year and a \$61.5 million bill for the 2008-09 fiscal year, however.

Gov. Bill Ritter and legislative leaders have warned lawmakers to think twice about moving bills with big price tags, making it likely the proposal faces a rougher road when it heads next to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Health and Human Services Committee applauded the intent, but Republicans questioned whether adding 129,000 kids to government rolls — 115,000 to Medicaid and 14,000 to CHP — is the best way to do that. Still, all five Democrats and GOP Sen. Steve Ward of Littleton voted in favor.

"I suggest that we have been talking about the issue long enough, and it's time now to hit the heart of the issue," said Sen. Brandon Shaffer, D-Longmont. "I do believe that the laws we make here and the votes we cast here express our priorities."

The bill would increase eligibility for Medicaid from 100 percent to 133 percent of the federal poverty level and raise eligibility for CHP from 200 percent to 300 percent. Families of four are eligible now for Medicaid with annual earnings of \$20,635 and for CHP with \$41,270; this would allow Medicaid enrollment at \$27,444 and CHP enrollment at \$61,905.

Susan Molina, a single mother of two from Denver, told the committee how she lost her family's insurance when she got a raise last year to push her slightly above the CHP threshold. Her 14- and 11-year-old children now worry about getting sick, a thought she believes should not burden teens.

But Sen. Shawn Mitchell, R-Broomfield, questioned why such an important and expensive bill is coming through so late in the session. By trying to cram discussion of an enormous change to the health care system into a one-hour hearing, legislators are not allowed to study what drawbacks it would have or what programs might be cut to

accommodate it, he said.

“This bill may be the most enlightened proposal to come to this body this year or it may be a well-intentioned, wrongheaded turn in the wrong direction,” Mitchell said. “All of that bears examination.”

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