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Health picture brighter for kids

The Senate Budget Committee votes to approve \$50 billion over five years.

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Gannett News Service

Washington — Congress took the first step this week to double the budget for a program running out of money that provides health insurance for 6 million low-income kids.

Missouri is one of more than a dozen states expected to run a shortfall under the State Children's Health Insurance Program, according to the Congressional Government Accountability Office.

The Senate Budget Committee voted 12-11 to approve \$50 billion over five years for the program, up from \$25 billion. That would allow the program to cover an additional 6 million children.

About 8 percent of Missouri's children are uninsured, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, compared with 12 percent nationally.

Officials from the Missouri Department of Social Services disagree with the findings of the GAO report that projects Missouri's program, known as MC Plus for Kids, would run out of SCHIP funds this year.

"We are OK, the funding is there," said Ana Compain-Romero, a spokeswoman for the department.

State officials say Missouri is not expected to experience shortfalls because it has increased premiums for the program and enrollment has dropped.

Last month, there were 65,945 children on the program compared with 67,122 a year earlier and more than 93,000 in 2005. About 125,000 children in the state were uninsured as of 2005, according to the latest figures by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Freshman Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill says she agrees with the GAO.

"Gov. (Matt) Blunt has cut the program, and we have a shortfall," McCaskill said. "I will be fighting with every fiber in my being to get the money so that every child who is eligible for SCHIP will be covered."

The full Senate and House still must approve the budget plan.

On Wednesday, presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., and Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., introduced legislation to extend the program to 9 million more children.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said March 9 that eliminating shortfalls in the program is the top health priority for House Democrats.

The Senate vote caps weeks of rallies on Capitol Hill by child advocates and others who want Congress to renew and expand a program popular among Republican and Democratic governors. The program is set to expire Oct. 1, but as many as 14 states could run out of money before that — some as early as May.

"It's not fair that the United States, the richest country in the world, can't provide insurance for its children," said Karen Borja, 17, of Coachella, Calif., who is uninsured.

Borja said she lacks insurance because her mother, a widow, earns too much to qualify for the program but too little to afford health insurance. She said her family must travel six hours to Mexico to purchase affordable health care.

Borja was among hundreds of clergy and parents organized by the PICO National Network who called on Congress last week to increase money for SCHIP to \$60 billion.

President Bush is proposing to increase the program by \$4.8 billion. The Congressional Budget Office says \$13 billion is needed to keep current kids covered.

Sylvia Ruiz of Orlando, Fla., said she could not afford private health insurance for her two children, ages 3 and 5. In November, she was able to obtain health insurance for her children under SCHIP.

When her children were uninsured, she said her pediatrician told her to take them to the emergency room.

"I can't begin to relay the feeling that a parent ... undergoes cradling a sick child and then being told to take them to the emergency room," said Ruiz, who earns \$15,000 annually.

Ruiz said she lobbied Congress last week to ask lawmakers to provide health insurance for all children as part of a faith-based group called FOCUS.

Some Republican lawmakers and Bush, concerned about spending and the deficit, want to restrict eligibility to those earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level — \$41,000 for a family of four — and limit the program to children. But more than 16 states cover children whose parents earn more.

Eleven states cover a total of 639,000 low-income parents or adults under waivers from the federal government. Minnesota, Wisconsin and Arizona cover more low-income adults than children.

The Rev. Heyward Higgins, pastor of Camden (N.J.) Bible Tabernacle and a member of Camden Churches Organized for People, said he doesn't understand why Congress can't find the federal dollars to pay for children's health insurance.

"We find money for a war, but for some reason we can't find money for our children," said Higgins, who was lobbying Congress for \$60 million last week. His home state is projected to run out of money this year. "I'm hard-pressed to understand that process and reasoning."

New Jersey covers children whose parents earn up to 350 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$72,000 for a family of four.

McCaskill said Congress' credibility is on the line in solving problems of the uninsured if it can't provide health coverage for needy kids.

"People should not take us seriously that we plan on helping any people with health insurance if we can't cover these children," McCaskill said.