

Kids' health coverage at risk



Edward Carpenter, The Examiner
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REDWOOD CITY, Calif. -

Health care coverage for thousands of local children of low-income families could be cut if federal funds aren't renewed and increased, according to officials.

More than 8,900 county children under age 19 depend on \$14.8 million in federal State Children's Health Insurance Program funds each year, said Marmi Bermudez, manager of the Children's Health Initiative Program.

But without congressional action, that money will run out at the end of September, raising concerns among area politicians and activists.

"If it's not renewed, then we will run out of money completely," said Barbara Erbacher, who serves on the health care work group of Peninsula Interfaith Action, a nonprofit coalition of religious

(AP file photo)

Health officials are concerned that San Mateo County could lose federal funds for children's health care unless Congress acts soon.

congregations on the Peninsula.

Her group sent more than 14 representatives to Washington, D.C., last month to lobby lawmakers on the issue, Erbacher said.

"Clearly, the number of uninsured kids has dropped dramatically because of the program," which the county uses to fund its Health Families Initiative, said Maya Altman, executive director of the Health Plan of San Mateo County, which administers Healthy Families.

She has seen the number of uninsured kids in the county drop from 17,000 in 2003 to about 3,000 in 2005, Altman said.

Even at current funding levels, the skyrocketing cost of health care means the county, along with others across the nation, won't be able to cover all the children it currently serves a year from now, according to Washington, D.C.-based think tank the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

"If [the federal government] continues funding at the current level without an increase, there would be a 17 percent reduction in the number of [county] children covered in 2008," Erbacher said.

Enacted in 1997 with an estimated budget of \$5 billion a year, SCHIP funding provides health care coverage for more than 4 million kids nationwide, most of whom would otherwise be uninsured, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, has vowed to fight for renewed funding and even an increase, according to Drew Hammill, spokesman for Pelosi.

"The top health priority for House Democrats is immediately eliminating the funding shortfalls for

the State Children's Health Insurance Program and significantly expanding the initiative later this year so millions of uninsured children can receive the medical care they need," Pelosi said.

The current House proposal would fund SCHIP at \$50 billion over five years, but has yet to be reconciled with a Senate proposal, Hammill said.

ecarpenter@examiner.com

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