

## **Families plead for increase to Denali KidCare health program** **HURTING: "It's not a luxury anymore," says one worried mother. "It's a necessity."**

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More than 200 people gathered at an Anchorage church Sunday to deliver an emotional plea: Don't just spare Denali KidCare funding, but increase it so more families are eligible.

The health insurance serves children and pregnant women from low-income families. But thousands fewer are served today than when Denali KidCare launched in 1998, due to changes in 2003 that limited eligibility.

Current legislation in Juneau would reverse those changes. And at Sunday's meeting, hosted by Anchorage Faith and Action -- Congregations Together (AFACT), KidCare supporters made a public push for restoring the program to its origins. Many testified to representatives from the offices of Gov. Sarah Palin and U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski.

"We need Denali KidCare for our working-class families," said Jody Komis, a mother who said her family can't afford private health care. "It's not a luxury anymore. It's a necessity."

Lydia Wilson, a bus driver, said she is terrified a recent raise will make her adopted son ineligible for Denali KidCare.

The raise "is hurting me more than it's helping," Wilson said. If she lost KidCare, she couldn't afford health care. And since her son has complex medical conditions, not having health care is not an option, she said.

"I may be forced to quit my job and go on welfare."

Denali KidCare, a state and federally funded program, started during Gov. Tony Knowles' administration in 1999. It was designed for families stuck in the uninsured gap -- between those on welfare and others working good-paying jobs with health benefits.

Children and pregnant women in working families qualified if their income was no more

than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That meant families of four with an annual income of \$41,760 or less.

In 2003, lawmakers reduced program eligibility to a hard-number income limit that didn't account for inflation. Today, a family of four can't make more than \$40,260 per year to qualify for Denali KidCare.

That translates to a family living at roughly 152 percent of the federal poverty level. AFACT leaders said only two states have tougher criteria.

Before 2003, Denali KidCare served 11,078 kids. Today, it helps 7,400. Some say that number will drop by as much as 1,000 children in the next year.

The Rev. Sara Jackson of St. Mark Lutheran Church said she's seen the heartache and frustration of families who can't get health care for their kids.

"No parent should have to deal with the uncertainty of relying on individual kindnesses for their child's health care," Jackson said.

Lawmakers this session have introduced several bills that would broaden eligibility guidelines. Those bills include:

- House Bill 140, which would make Denali KidCare available to children and pregnant women with household incomes up to 350 percent of the federal poverty level.

The bill would increase Denali KidCare eligibility to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. From 201 percent to 350 percent of the federal poverty level, families could pay for the health care coverage based on a sliding scale -- from \$200 to \$1,200 a year, plus a 20 percent co-pay for services. They could pay with Permanent Fund dividends too.

- Senate Bills 4, 27 and 87 and House Bill 198 would undo the 2003 changes to Denali KidCare and restore eligibility to those whose income is at 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Komis, who testified that insurance has remained just out of her family's reach, said a change is needed. Too many families who need Denali KidCare are getting left out, she said.

"The cost of insurance has simply outpaced our income," Komis said.

Recently, her 2-year-old son slipped, fell and cut his face just above his right eye. A worried Komis took him to a medical facility. She imagined it would cost somewhere around \$200 to get him checked out. They told her it would cost at least \$400 to examine him, Komis said.

"That was like a glass of icy cold water thrown in my face," she said.

Christine Neal's 3-year-old grandson, Sammy, was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that attacks his joints and muscles. Sammy is unable to walk and can barely crawl, Neal testified.

Sammy's parents are not rich, nor are they poor, but they don't qualify for Denali KidCare because their income exceeds the limit by just \$50, Neal said.

Sammy has received help from the Shriners organization, and that's a blessing, Neal said.

"But Denali KidCare could be so helpful."

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