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Democrats push child health care

Uninsured kids are latest focus, though Assembly is to vote today on overall package from governor.

By Aurelio Rojas - Bee Capitol Bureau

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With time running out in California's legislative session, Democrats are preparing to move forward with legislation to provide coverage for all uninsured children if more ambitious health care efforts fail.

"We ought to achieve comprehensive health care reform, but our first priority must be children," Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, said Wednesday at a Capitol news conference to tout children's health care.

Steinberg's Senate Bill 32 and a companion bill, Assembly Bill 1 by Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, would expand the children's Healthy Families Program by increasing the household income limit from \$51,625 for a family of four, or 250 percent of the federal poverty level, to \$61,950, or 300 percent.

But there's currently no funding in the legislation, which would require the state to spend \$225 million more annually to cover the estimated 800,000 children without insurance in California.

Any legislation would have to be approved before the Legislature adjourns Sept. 14, unless Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger calls a special session.

"If our bills become the vehicle (for health care changes), they will be amended to include a funding source to either fund the full amount or at least a significant start for year one," Steinberg said.

Steinberg conceded that the funding is contingent on expansion of the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP. The expansion, which would be funded by an increase in tobacco taxes, has bipartisan support in Congress but faces a threatened veto by President Bush.

Schwarzenegger, who made a surprise appearance at the news conference in the Capitol, released a joint letter Wednesday that he and New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer sent to Bush asking for his support.

The Republican governor said he supports covering all children but remains committed to a more comprehensive plan that would increase access for more of the 6.5 million Californians without health insurance.

Calling it "embarrassing and a shame" that a prosperous state should have so many uninsured people, the governor said a piecemeal approach would be wrong.

"We should really not try to find a little solution to a big program," Schwarzenegger said. "We should look at this as a big problem and find a big solution to the whole thing."

Schwarzenegger's proposal, which Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez plans to put to a vote today, would require employers to spend at least 4 percent of their payroll on health care and employees to contribute to the cost of their coverage.

It would also charge hospitals 4 percent of revenue and doctors 2 percent to help pay for his plan. Republicans in the Legislature uniformly oppose the assessments, which they say are taxes.

Núñez said the Assembly vote is intended to demonstrate the governor's plan is politically unfeasible.

"What I'm trying to do through this exercise is to show that there's not a lot of support for (the governor's proposal), but there's ingredients that we need to take and put into AB 8," the speaker said.

That bill, which was put together by Núñez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, would require employers to spend at least 7.5 percent of their payroll on health care. Unlike the governor's plan, it would not require everyone to obtain health insurance.

Schwarzenegger said he will not sign such a bill because it would place too much of the economic burden on businesses.

"I just want to add our ideas to that package and make sure we spread the responsibilities and more entities join in rather than going after just one," the governor said.

Schwarzenegger said that regardless of today's vote in the Assembly, he plans to continue negotiations with Democrats.

Wendy Lazarus, founder and co-president of the Children's Partnership, an advocacy group involved in the movement to cover all children, said advocates continue to support "comprehensive health reform."

But, she said, bringing "health coverage to every child in California should be the governor and Legislature's top priority for the rest of this Legislature and a litmus test" to judge leadership in the state.

Lazarus said that the more than 30 local children's health initiatives in the state are running out of money, with lower funding from local and state contributions, and tobacco tax revenue.

"We're in a crucial point for kids in this state," she said. "Our local health initiatives are hard-pressed to keep doors open and things are trending in the wrong direction, which is backward for kids."

Moreover, Lazarus noted the recent budget negotiations "sadly, wiped out the progress that we made last year in increasing access to health care for kids."

The governor vetoed \$13.8 million that would have enrolled an estimated 94,000 eligible children for state health coverage and \$15 million in county outreach grants to enroll children in health care programs.

"Unless our elected officials move forward with reform to include both the policy and the funding to cover all kids, it would be tragic and ironic that in this year of health reform kids actually go backward," Lazarus said.

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