



Kids' health care access improves

But insurance for county's low-income youths still needs funding, report says

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Programs run by San Mateo and Santa Clara counties that provide health insurance for poor children have greatly expanded those youths' access to medical care, according to a report released this week.

The policy brief evaluating the counties' Healthy Kids insurance programs comes as lawmakers in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. debate the expansion of government-run health care programs.

Officials hail the success of Healthy Kids, which provides low-cost insurance for children who don't qualify for Medi-Cal or Healthy Families, the counties' low-cost insurance plan for adults.

The brief, released Monday, was based on research conducted by Mathematica Policy Research Inc., University of California, San Francisco, and the Urban Institute. The groups also analyzed gains made in Los Angeles County's Healthy Kids program.

Surveys conducted in San Mateo County found that 90 percent of children enrolled in Healthy Kids had regular access to medical care, such as a local clinic or private doctor, compared to 58 percent of youths not in the program.

Santa Clara's margin was even wider, with 89 percent of participants having regular access to care, compared to 49 percent not in the program.

Among other benefits, preventive care reduces absenteeism in schools, keeps parents at work and lowers the number of emergency room visits, officials said.

"This is the absolute affirmation that the relatively small investment in making sure children have access to health care has big, huge payoffs," said Dana Hughes, a professor of health policy at UC San Francisco and a co-author of the brief.

Parents' confidence that their children can obtain health care also soars when their offspring are enrolled in Healthy Kids. About 75 percent of Santa Clara County parents were "very confident" that their children can get care with the program compared to about 41 percent without; in San Mateo County the difference was 66 percent compared to 42 percent.

Officials in both counties said the brief provides more evidence that legislators should make expanding health care for children a priority. Twenty-five counties statewide participate in the program, giving coverage to some 85,000 youths.

"As the state is looking at universal coverage for people, a very key component, of course, is coverage for kids. This just verifies why that should happen," said Leona Butler, CEO of the Santa Clara Family Health Plan.

The Democratic-controlled Congress has tried to pass a \$35 billion plan to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides some funds for Healthy Kids.

But President Bush vetoed the legislation in October and a revised bill hasn't yet made it back to his desk.

Marmi Bermudez, health coverage coordinator for San Mateo County, said securing new funding will be critical to keep the program running.

It operates on about \$9 million per year in private and public funds; Santa Clara's budget is about \$12 million.

"I think it's something for the Legislature to look at," Bermudez said.

"The health coverage for children is inexpensive, if you think about it, so why not invest in it? Taking it away will just make the problem worse."