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Uninsured Children and Families Should Remain High Priority in Budget Negotiations

Increase in provider rates essential to ensure access to health care

As the Governor and legislative leaders enter budget negotiations, a statewide policy thinktank for children and families, is encouraging legislators and the Governor to make significant health care reforms for children and families a high priority, including an increase in reimbursement rates for Medicaid and HUSKY health care providers. Connecticut Voices for Children called the health care bill approved by the Connecticut House and Senate this week an important step toward expanding access to health care for Connecticut children, parents, and pregnant women.

“It is a simple idea – if we invest in children’s health care, we get healthy children eager to learn and grow,” said Shelley Geballe, President of Connecticut Voices for Children. “If we deny health care coverage, we get unhealthy children falling behind in school and unable to become productive members of our community.”

“Expanding access to preventive care reduces costs for the entire health care system,” said Sharon Langer, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. “We’re pleased that legislators are building on a model that has already worked to reduce the number of uninsured children and parents.”

The health care bill seeks to improve access to health care, primarily by expanding eligibility for the state’s HUSKY health insurance program. Throughout the legislative session, it was clear that the ideas in the bill to expand HUSKY coverage had strong bipartisan support.

Among its provisions, the legislation:

- Enables more parents, pregnant women, and children to get health coverage by raising the income limits for HUSKY. The legislature’s Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA) estimates that these eligibility changes will result in 9,700 additional parents and 7,100 additional children enrolling (no estimate is provided for pregnant women).
- Helps parents to enroll uninsured newborns in HUSKY while in the hospital (about 1,080 uninsured infants are born each year, according to an estimate cited by OFA).
- Covers medical interpretation services for HUSKY families, helping to ensure that families receive appropriate care and that medical instructions are communicated accurately.

- Allows employer-based health plans to cover unmarried adult children through age 26. The Connecticut Office of Health Care Access recently reported that an estimated 22% of young adults ages 19-29 are currently uninsured (or 95,000 young adults).

While the legislation calls for an increase in the rates paid to Medicaid and HUSKY health care providers, it does not specify any new funds for this purpose. The very low reimbursement rates that are currently paid these providers mean that many providers do not participate in HUSKY, reducing access to care. A recent survey commissioned by the Department of Social Services found that only 26% of new HUSKY enrollees were able to make an appointment for routine care with a health care provider. Connecticut Voices for Children called on the legislature and Governor to fund a substantial increase in the rates paid to medical, dental, and hospital providers.

“We can’t ensure that families enrolled in HUSKY will get the health care they need unless there are enough providers to serve them,” said Mary Glassman, Director of Legislative Affairs at Connecticut Voices for Children. “Enrolling families in HUSKY is only the first step. Increasing provider rates will help get us to the ultimate goal – access to health care.”

A public opinion poll released by Connecticut Voices in March found strong support for expanding HUSKY among Connecticut voters:

- 89% of respondents favor expanding the HUSKY health insurance program so that every uninsured child in the state could get health care coverage.
- 85% of voters favor investing more state funds in HUSKY.
- More than nine in ten residents (94%) agree that providing preventive health care to children and avoiding costly emergency care are smart investments of taxpayer dollars.
- Nine in ten (90%) also support offering affordable coverage to low-income parents of children enrolled in HUSKY.

In 2005, an estimated 68,000 Connecticut children under 18 (8.2%) were uninsured for the entire year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Connecticut Voices for Children is a statewide, research-based policy and advocacy organization for children and families (www.ctkidslink.org).

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