

## **Eureka Times-Standard (CA)**

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### **Del Norte children's program moving forward**

By Sara Watson Arthurs

CRESCENT CITY -- An effort to make sure all Del Norte County children have health insurance is gaining steam.

The Children's Health Initiative, as it's called, was one of the main topics of discussion at a recent meeting of the Community Health Alliance of Humboldt-Del Norte in Crescent City on Thursday.

The Del Norte Coalition for Better Health, the group behind the Children's Health Initiative, is working to make sure that every child from birth to age 18 in Del Norte County has health insurance, Del Norte First 5 Commission Executive Director Patty Vernelson said. It's part of a statewide movement.

There are only about 750 children in the county without health insurance, said Sally Smart of the Del Norte County Department of Health and Social Services. Of these, she estimated that about two-thirds are eligible for state-subsidized programs like Healthy Families and Medi-Cal. It's just a matter of getting them signed up, something she said has gotten easier since the county started working closely with the schools. Since a family needs to demonstrate its income to qualify for free lunch at school, that proof of income can also be used for health care.

As for those who don't qualify for state-subsidized programs, the Children's Health Initiative team is raising funds and seeking grants from foundations to start a health insurance program. Families who earn up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level -- \$58,050 for a family of four -- could be covered under the plan.

A fact sheet from the coalition notes that childhood illnesses such as dental disease can be prevented through routine medical and dental care.

"Preventive care saves money by remedying minor problems before they become urgent and expensive," the fact sheet states. "Uninsured children are five times more likely to be treated in an emergency room, the only alternative for the uninsured. In contrast, health insurance links families to a primary care physician, eliminating the need for costly emergency room treatment, which is ultimately paid for by consumers and taxpayers." Vernelson noted that no one had any idea, upon starting the endeavor, how much work it would actually be. She said that working to ensure that all children had health insurance meant agencies not used to collaborating had to "give up turf," a good lesson for future endeavors. The coalition includes representatives of the schools, county leaders, medical providers and children's agencies.

Allan Katz, executive director of the Community Health Alliance, noted that kids still need a "medical home" -- a regular doctor or dentist --after getting insurance.

"The point is not insurance," he said. "The point is preventive health care."

Thursday's meeting also included a brief discussion of ongoing efforts to recruit and retain physicians in Del Norte County.

Del Norte County Supervisor Martha McClure said the county is working with health care providers but the Del Norte Healthcare District is taking the lead. McClure mentioned creating an "exit interview" process for doctors leaving.

Heather Bonser-Bishop, executive director of the North Coast Clinics Network, said she recently submitted an application to designate the area a federal low-income health care provider shortage area. Regions are rated with different scores according to how serious the shortage of health care providers is, and higher scores mean better luck in attracting new doctors who may get part of their medical school loans forgiven in exchange for practicing there, she said. But Bonser-Bishop said the approval process is a long one, and the community must wait to see if Del Norte's score has increased.

Clarke Moore of the Del Norte Healthcare District gave a brief overview of a planned new center, also a communitywide project with different agencies participating.

The Del Norte Community Wellness Center will include different agencies in one building. The Open Door Community Health Center and the Area Agency on Aging will be located at the site, at Northcrest Drive and Washington Boulevard in Crescent City. It's expected to cost \$6.3 million. Of this, \$3 million will come from a federal rural development loan, \$2.4 million from the health care district and \$900,000 from a community development block grant the county received.

It's been in the works for years. But Moore said that the district just completed escrow on the property, and hopes to have the building occupied by August 2006.

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