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Group wants all kids covered

By Zeke Barlow

Wide backing would be needed for Children's Health Initiative

Providing healthcare for every child in Ventura County is feasible within two years if a broad coalition of private industry, public officials and the healthcare industry latches onto an idea that has spread to 17 other California counties, a group of healthcare officials says.

Proponents of the Children's Health Initiative said Wednesday's conference in Camarillo was the first step toward assuring that the roughly 35,000 children in the county who don't have health coverage will get it through existing programs and a new one -- CHI. The plan, which could cost at least \$5 million annually, not only would require support from local government, but also would call on the private sector to donate funds to keep the program afloat.

"This is at the level of crisis," Maricela Morales, associate executive director of the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy, said of the healthcare system. "It's the biggest constant thorn in the side of the United States, California and Ventura County."

About 44 million Americans do not have health insurance.

Since the CHI program started in Santa Clara County in 2001, 17 other counties, including all those that border Ventura County, have embraced the idea. Of the roughly 35,000 uninsured children in Ventura County, about 85 percent are not taking advantage of healthcare eligibility through either Medi-Cal or Healthy Families programs, Morales said. The remaining 15 percent could be provided for through the CHI program.

Most of those don't qualify for an existing plan because their families make too much money for the Healthy Families program or because they are undocumented children. Since the CHI programs started, people have been drawn toward all government health programs, said Dana Hughes, associate professor at the University of San Francisco. In Santa Clara County, the number of people enrolled in Medi-Cal and Healthy Families increased 28 percent after CHI was established.

About 70 percent of the money to fund the program comes from government sources, including tobacco-settlement money and state sources. The remainder would be funded through the community.

Funding called a challenge

Though Santa Clara County embraced the idea and is having success, Bob Brownstein, policy director with Working Partnerships USA, said it is an ongoing challenge to keep funding flowing into the program. Fund raising is constantly required, he said. Brownstein said Santa Clara County spends \$7 million annually on its program but got back \$24.4 million once state and federal agencies reimbursed increased healthcare costs. Fewer children miss school days, so state funding increases because of higher school enrollment, he said.

Ventura County Board of Supervisors Chairman Steve Bennett said the idea is a good one, but far from a done deal.

"It is very important," Bennett said. "With such a broken and fragmented healthcare system that we have, we are all in this county going to be better off and safer if we can get health insurance for all children."

Dr. Paul Russell, head of maternal and child health for the Ventura County Department of Public Health, said uninsured, sick children often spread illnesses to healthy, insured children, so it behooves everyone to have everyone insured.

Russell said he sees uninsured children in his clinic all the time, and there needs to be a solution. He said the issue, however, can be political as much as medical. He said some people argue that the government doesn't need to be providing healthcare for people illegally in the country in the first place.

"Clearly that isn't the right approach," he said.

Morales said she was planning to gather a core group of those interested in the program early next year. She's hopeful this program will work.

"Finally," she said. "Universal healthcare for children."

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