

The Courier-Journal

Louisville, KY

Sunday, March 30, 2008

Louisville group seeks to boost enrollment in health care plan for low-income children

Eligible children not being enrolled

By Deborah Yetter

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- A local faith-based group is planning to tackle the problem of the large number of local children who qualify but aren't enrolled in a Kentucky Medicaid health plan for low-income children.

CLOUT -- Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together -- said as many as 1,000 of its members plan to use the annual meeting tomorrow to launch a community plan to get more kids enrolled in Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program, also known as KCHIP.

Statewide, only about half the roughly 110,000 children believed to be eligible for the program are enrolled, which advocates blame on the state's lack of outreach efforts and a cumbersome application process.

About 13,000 of those left out of the program are in Louisville, according to CLOUT, an interfaith advocacy group.

"It was shocking when we found out the true number," said Bishop Walter Jones, pastor at Baptized Pentecostal Church of Holiness and CLOUT co-president. "That's an awful lot of children in our community."

KCHIP is designed to provide health coverage for children whose parents work but can't afford health insurance. It covers children whose parents earn as much as 200 percent of the federal poverty level -- about \$41,000 a year for a family of four.

Officials have long been aware the state is serving far fewer children than are eligible for the federal-state health plan but say because of budget problems they have had to cut back efforts to locate and sign up families. Also, because of budget pressures on the state's \$4.7 billion Medicaid program, an influx of new members could further strain the program, state officials said.

The federal government pays 78 percent of the cost of the program, and Kentucky pays the rest. But coming up with the state's share has been increasingly difficult in recent years, state officials say.

Steve Nunn, the deputy secretary of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, which administers Medicaid, said he understands CLOUT's concern, but given the state's current unresolved budget crisis, isn't sure how much help the state can offer.

"Until we get a budget passed and see what the effect is on Medicaid and our cabinet, it's very difficult to commit to anything," Nunn said.

Still, Nunn said he plans to attend tomorrow's meeting and offer what assistance he can.