

## Improvements in child health care urged

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*Kendra Fridenstine on the closing of five Metro Parks pools*

A standing-room-only crowd of men and women from churches around Jefferson County packed the expansive Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church, 318 W. St. Catherine, Monday night to demand better health care coverage for children.

The 1,000 or so members of CLOUT (Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together) invited local officials and others who work in health care to declare their commitment to improving the system.

In particular, the group wants Jefferson County to develop a pilot program that would increase enrollment and retention of children who are eligible for Medicaid and KCHIP (the Kentucky Children's Health Insurance program for low-income families).

According to CLOUT organizers, 13,000 children who are eligible in Jefferson County do not receive benefits from the Medicaid or KCHIP programs. Less than half of KCHIP-eligible children are enrolled.

Last year, 2,000 of the 3,000 children who were dropped from the two programs lost eligibility for administrative reasons that could have been avoided, said Father Louis Meiman, co-president of CLOUT and pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church.

"The main thing we need to do is make enrollment (in the programs) easier," he said, noting that the Kentucky legislature has over several years voted to cut the number of places where families can enroll. The state also requires face-to-face interviews for initial enrollment in KCHIP, he said.

"Kentucky and Tennessee are the only states that require face-to-face interviews," he said. "That's a real hardship for the working poor. KCHIP is for people who are working. They're living in poverty, yet they're working 40, 50, 60 hours a week. They have to take off work and lose pay" to enroll in KCHIP.

Father Meiman said the issue of health care has been a concern of the group since last fall, but the group knew there was no quick fix for the entire system. They narrowed the issues to something they believe can be fixed with relative ease, he said.

"We want to make enrollment easier" and to ensure that all of those eligible have access to the programs, he added.

Another issue the group wants to tackle is the loss of eligibility for administrative reasons.

Latonya Cain, a single mother of seven children, receives food stamps and other assistance, but she can't get her children covered under KCHIP because her records show she receives child support payments that place her income above the qualifying level.

Cain told the CLOUT assembly that she doesn't actually receive the child support payments. And while the office that gives her food stamps recognizes she doesn't receive the payments, the KCHIP office does not, she said. As a result, when her eight-year-old daughter, who is diabetic, needs care, she takes her to the emergency room.

The CLOUT assembly called on local officials, including Dr. Adewale Troutman, director of the Louisville Metro Department of Health and Wellness, and Steve Nunn, deputy secretary of the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, to change the status quo.

Troutman said he has been working on health equity issues since he was 19 years old and intends to work "tirelessly" on the issue of insuring children. He also pledged that his department will work directly to address the issues raised by CLOUT.

Nunn spoke on behalf of Gov. Steve Beshear, saying that despite budget problems in the state, the governor will keep his campaign promise to improve health care for children.

Representatives of local hospitals, advocacy groups and medical groups also pledged their support to help develop, fund and implement the proposed pilot program.

In addition to medical care, the CLOUT assembly also addressed the issue of healthy activity for children, noting that five of Metro Parks' nine outdoor pools have been closed by Metro Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson.

Father Meiman said the closings are a result of budget cuts, and they target pools in lower-income areas. The closed pools are Breslin in Irish Hill, Hazelwood near Iroquois Park, Shelby Park in Smoketown, Watterson in

greater Hikes Point and Western in Shively.

Kendra Fridenstine, a young woman who grew up swimming at the Breslin Pool, said she learned to swim there and that it provided a safe activity for her as a child.

“Many of the kids in our neighborhood don’t have air conditioning,” she noted. “It’s going to be a long hot summer without the Breslin Pool. I’m worried about the younger kids — there’s not much going on for kids there anyway.”

Fridenstine made an appeal to Mayor Abramson, “Please don’t take our pool away.”

According to CLOUT, the pool closings in Louisville will leave one pool per 150,000 people. Indianapolis has one pool per 20,000; Cincinnati has one per 11,000 and Lexington has one per 30,000.

A spokesman for Metro Parks, Jason Cissell, said the decision to close the pools is part of \$550,000 in budget cuts that Metro Parks must make this year. The age and conditions of the pools — some are more than 50 years old — and attendance rates were used to determine closings. He said the pools are not expected to come back in service.

“This was the most responsible decision we could make,” in light of the budget limits, said Cissell.

Father Meiman said the pool closings will affect the health and wellness of children who already have few opportunities for safe and healthy activities in their neighborhoods. It’s also an issue of health equity — children across the city should have access to healthy activity, he said.

“The places where this (health inequity) tends to happen is in the parts of the city where people have the least access to things,” said Father Meiman. “The mayor has stated he wants to address the issue of equity. And he has done a good job of it. But we think this (decision to close five pools) doesn’t line up with that.”

CLOUT called on Abramson and the Metro Council to reconsider the closings and to explore the idea of public-private partnerships to fund the pools.

CLOUT is comprised of churches around Jefferson County that work together for social justice. Catholic churches involved in the group include St. Agnes, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Pius X, St. William and Epiphany.

CLOUT wants changes to Medicaid, KCHIP; opposes closing of five Metro Parks pools

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