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Idaho to stop paying for insured kids' vaccines

State health officials say Idaho is dead last in the nation when it comes to kids' vaccination rates, and they fear the numbers will fall even lower as the state cuts its free vaccination program.

Currently, Idaho covers the costs of vaccinations for every child. But that program is ending amid statewide budget cuts - on July 1, only kids who are uninsured, underinsured or who qualify for Medicaid will be eligible for the free vaccines.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare offered a workshop Tuesday on the new system. Rebecca Coyle, program manager for the Idaho Immunization Program, said at the workshop that she expects to see a dip in immunization rates with the change, in part because some parents may be unwilling to pay for the vaccines.

Idaho's immunization rate is 58 percent. In fact, Coyle said, the countries of Pakistan, Indonesia and Croatia all have higher measles immunization rates than Idaho, and the countries of Botswana, Latvia and Sri Lanka have vaccinated more of their children against polio than Idaho.

Jeremey Cureton, the lead registered nurse for physician services at St. Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, said he was concerned about any change that could lower Idaho's already dismal vaccination rates.

"I have three kids and I want the kids around them to make sure they're immunized, to get that herd immunity," he said. "Idaho is lagging behind already in vaccination rates. Our community health is important, and I'm really curious to see what this does to the rates."

Other states that don't provide free vaccines for all children still have high vaccination rates, so Idaho should still be able to boost vaccination rates despite the changes in coverage, said Tamarie Olson, the state coordinator of Vaccines for Children, commonly referred to as VFC. Still, she acknowledged that at least in the short term, the state is likely to see a dip.

Health care providers will be responsible for screening patients to determine who is eligible for the free vaccines. They'll also have to tell the state how many state-covered vaccines they'll need in the coming month or so, Olson said, and they'll have to order directly from the distributor or manufacturer the vaccines they intend to give to insured patients.

Because the health care providers will likely have to prepay for their private stock of vaccines, some may opt not to offer vaccinations at all, Coyle said. Some smaller providers are considering forming purchasing groups so they can get bulk discounts from the vaccine companies, Olson said.

"We're concerned that we'll have providers withdraw from the program," Coyle said.

That would mean parents would bring their kids to their usual doctors for checkups, but have to go somewhere else - like a district health department - to get the children vaccinated. That could further depress vaccination rates, she said.

It could be two years before the state is able to determine just how the program has affected vaccination rates, Coyle said. The state will provide VFC stickers so providers can easily mark the state-covered vaccines to prevent any mix-ups, Olson said. She warned the providers against any intentional switching.

"Using VFC vaccine for non-VFC children is fraud," she said. Unintentional mistakes would be considered an "educational issue," she said, but the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare will investigate any suspected cases of fraud.

Even if kids are insured under policies with high deductibles, and they haven't met their deductible yet, they will have to purchase their own vaccines, Olson said. But if their insurance caps the amount of money it pay for vaccines, the child would be eligible for the free program once that cap is met.

Recent outbreaks of whooping cough provide a strong example of why vaccinations are important, Coyle said. An eastern Idaho infant, who wasn't old enough to be vaccinated, died of whooping cough earlier this year, and dozens were sickened around the state. Meningitis also appears to be increasing this year, she said, with five cases discovered in Idaho since January, compared to six cases recorded in all of 2008.

Several issues contribute to Idaho's low vaccination rate, Coyle said. Not all health care providers remind parents to vaccinate their children, and some parents simply forget, she said. Some children are on alternative vaccination schedules, because of medical problems or other issues, she said. And some parents are hesitant to vaccinate their children.