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CHIP looks to be more costly, any way it's sliced

BOISE - Idaho could be facing much higher costs for the Children's Health Insurance Program, even if Congress reauthorizes the program.

About 22,000 Idaho children currently receive health insurance coverage through the CHIP program, which serves children whose parents earn 133 percent to 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

Russ Barron, director of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, told the joint budget committee Monday that federal funding for the program is set to expire March 31.

"We have two basic concerns," Barron said. "First, will CHIP be reauthorized? We think it will be; if not, we're looking at a couple of options."

For example, some of the children could be covered through their parents' health plans, he said. Idaho also could expand Medicaid eligibility to the children; that option would cost the state about \$24 million per year, with the federal government contributing another \$56 million.

Secondly, even if Congress reauthorizes the program, Barron said, it could require a higher state matching contribution.

Historically, the federal government covered 80 percent of the cost of the CHIP program, with states picking up the remaining 20 percent. The Affordable Care Act, however, boosted federal coverage to 100 percent.

"It sounds like that might drop back to 80-20," Barron said. "If that occurs, we would need additional state funding. They would gradually phase in the 80-20 match, so our best guess is that we'd need \$6 million (in state funding) in fiscal 2020, and about \$20 million by fiscal 2022."

Barron said he would keep the committee informed. His "best guess" is that Congress will provide more guidance on the issue in the coming weeks.

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