

## 35,000 Idaho kids poised to lose care

Congress failed to reauthorize a program last week that gives children from lower-income families a lifeline to medical care.

The Children's Health Insurance Program, better known as CHIP, expired Saturday. It covers about 35,000 children in Idaho, according to a federal commission that advises Congress on CHIP.

The program didn't just vanish over the weekend, but the federal funding supply that helps to sustain it has been cut off. Most states have leftover funding to keep the program running for a while. For some states, including Idaho, the money will last only a few months.

The top Republican and Democratic members of the Senate Finance Committee last month announced they'd reached an agreement to renew CHIP. The proposal by Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Ron Wyden, D-Ore., would continue funding at 2017 levels for another two years, with reductions in future years.

"We currently expect funding to last at least through January, and we are hopeful that Congress will pass the Hatch-Wyden bill making its way through the Senate that would extend CHIP funding," said Niki Forbing-Orr, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare spokeswoman. "If funding is not extended, we do have contingency plans for maintaining children's coverage."

The contingency plan is to move children from CHIP onto Medicaid, she said.

Officials from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services were "supportive" of that idea based on early talks about Idaho's options if CHIP funding runs out, Forbing-Orr said.

"But it's still very early, and we are still analyzing the impact," she said. "We are confident that we will have coverage for children currently enrolled in CHIP, as directed by our current state statutes."

More than two dozen states are projected to run out of federal CHIP money by spring of next year. Four states are projected to exhaust their CHIP funds much sooner — between now and Dec. 31.

"I think that if CHIP isn't reauthorized by the end of the year, Idaho kids are going to suffer," said Liz Woodruff, assistant director of Idaho Voices for Children. "And it's going to be very difficult to have access to that affordable coverage."

Woodruff's organization has asked Sen. Mike Crapo, who sits on the Senate Finance Committee, to support the Hatch-Wyden agreement to renew CHIP.

The committee is scheduled to take up the bill Wednesday.

"He has been supportive of the program," said Crapo spokesman Lindsey Nothorn. The senator's support for the bill, he said, "will depend on what amendments to it are brought on Wednesday."

## *Why does CHIP matter?*

The Children's Health Insurance Program covers about 9 million children in the U.S.

It was created in 1997 to provide health insurance to children whose families have low to moderate incomes — generally, those who don't qualify for Medicaid but otherwise could not afford health insurance. It also covers pregnant women who meet eligibility requirements.

Since the law passed, the rate of uninsured American children has fallen from about 14 percent to less than 5 percent.

Each state can tailor its CHIP program, to some degree. For example, Idaho caps eligibility at 185 percent of the federal poverty line and requires some families to pay small premiums or copays.

"It is a very, very important program," said David Pate, CEO of St. Luke's Health System.

St. Luke's operates Idaho's only children's hospital. As the state's largest Medicaid provider, St. Luke's likely is the largest provider of health care to CHIP patients as well, he said.

Congressional inaction last week left Pate "disappointed," he said. "These kind of things that they knew were coming, that they knew had an approaching deadline, just continue to shake people's confidence that Congress is working the way it needs to work."

Pate added that he's "optimistic" that Congress will revive the program sometime this month.

## *Who qualifies for CHIP?*

The Idaho Health Plan for Children — the state's version of CHIP — is available to children who:

- Live in Idaho
- Are 18 or younger
- Are U.S. citizens or legal residents
- Do not have private health insurance
- Have a family income up to 185% of poverty level

###

Copyright 2017 The Idaho Statesman