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Feds, state discuss protecting uninsured children

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Federal Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala was preaching to the choir at this week's Children's Health Summit in Wilsonville.

She urged a room full of health advocates to push Oregon legislators to go after all of the nearly \$40 million in federal dollars available to subsidize health insurance for children. The catch? Federal dollars require a 25 percent state match, or about \$10 million. It's a hefty price tag considering state officials already are talking about the fiscal crunch Oregon will face when legislators go into session in January.

"I think money is going to be tough next year," said Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby, who participated in a summit panel that

followed Shalala. "Where are we going to find the money to do the match?"

The federal money is part of the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, a national initiative in which 18 states are participating, including Oregon. It is estimated that the funds could buy health coverage for as many as 17,000 Oregon children, as early as July 1, 1999. Advocates estimate that there are 71,000 uninsured children in the state.

Rural Oregon counties had the highest percentage of uninsured children—as high as 17 percent in Northeast counties, according to Children First of Oregon, a children's advocacy nonprofit. The Portland metropolitan area had the fewest uninsured children, about 4 percent.

Children of the working poor are the target of CHIP. It would supplement the

existing coverage that low-income families receive through Medicaid by raising the income limits, which restrict eligibility.

"There ought to be no reason why this Legislature in this progressive state can't come up with the money to cover all of them," Shalala said during the Sept. 14 meeting.

She received a standing ovation following her remarks as she and summit co-sponsor, Rep. Darlene Hooley, D-Salem, caught a flight to Washington, D.C. Hooley represents Oregon's fifth congressional district.

Nationally, CHIP has set aside \$24 billion to subsidize the state programs, intended to reduce the estimated 10 million uninsured children in the United States.

Shalala said the feds also have offered technical assistance to help find and

enroll children, often the most difficult part of expanding such coverage. She said parents frequently are either reluctant to seek coverage or may mistakenly think the program is available only to welfare recipients.

Carlos Olivardes, who operates clinics for migrant farm workers in Yakima and Woodburn, said the CHIP program still falls short because it excludes children of migrant farm workers.

An injury prevention specialist at Legacy Health System suggested that health insurers consider including coverage for preventive items such as bike helmets for children.

"The federal government and state governments can't pick up every single cost," said Shalala. "We can't just give away stuff free all the time." □