

Lawmakers urged to fund kids' health

Advocates for children seek to keep statewide school-based operations open.

By TRACY LOEW
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Without help, school-based health centers across the state will begin closing this summer, leaving many children with no access to health care, health advocates told legislators Monday.

"These clinics support education. Healthy kids are better ready to learn and miss less school," said Liz Smith, of Children First for Oregon.

Gov. John Kitzhaber's proposed budget eliminates funding for school-based health centers. Advocates are asking legislators for \$3 million to keep those cen-

About the bills

HB 2960 establishes a goal for the number of school nurses employed by school districts. It allocates a portion of the Tobacco Master Settlement money to the Department of Education for grants to school districts to employ nurses. The bill is before the Joint Ways and Means Committee.

HB 2820 allocates a portion of the tobacco settlement money to the Oregon Health Division for grants to county health departments for school-based health centers. The bill appears to have died in the House education committee.

ters running for the next two years.

They say the centers are especially important in heading off growing problems such as drug use, gun violence, unprotected sex, eating disorders and

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attempted suicide.

For example, Oregon's rate of suicide among 15- to 19-year-olds is 29 percent higher than the national average.

"We provide intervention before the small problems turn into big problems and before big problems become tragedies," said Irene Prince, a nurse at Baker City's school-based health center.

Paula Apa-Hall, president of the Oregon School Nurse Association, said 96 percent of health care in Oregon schools is provid-

ed by nonlicensed personnel.

That means teachers, secretaries and aides are giving insulin, monitoring seizures, making sure medications are administered properly, and even giving tube feedings or catheterizing children.

Oregon ranks 40th in the nation in providing school nursing services, said Rep. Laurie Monnes Anderson, D-Gresham.

Monnes Anderson has sponsored two bills that would dedicate some of the state's tobacco settlement money to school health centers.

Oregon's first school-based health centers were established 15 years ago.

Today there are 46 centers statewide — 28 in high schools, 10 in middle schools and eight in elementary schools.

There are none in Marion or

Polk counties.

The centers provided care to 21,600 youths who made 70,100 clinic visits, according to a recent Oregon Health Division report.

Most visits were for health checkups, preventive services, treatment of acute illnesses or injuries or for management of chronic conditions. A third of clients did not have insurance.

State general fund money pays about a third of the cost of operating the centers.

Other funding comes from counties, school districts, foundations and business contributions.

Kitzhaber chose to cut funding for school-based health centers because it is not mandatory; some centers will survive without state funding and because most clients will still have

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access to health care through Medicaid or the Oregon Health Plan, spokesman Bob Applegate said. But advocates disagree. Low-income, hourly employees may find it too costly or difficult to take time off work to take children in for minor illnesses, said Ellen Lowe, legislative advocate for the Oregon Law Center. Without convenient health services, Lowe said, those children are likely to end up with more costly and severe problems. And Baker City school-nurse Prince said she serves families who would have to drive 45 miles to La Grande to see the nearest pediatrician.

