

# Oregon's needy children need better health care

The Oregonian editorial "Kids come first" (July 6, 2004) correctly points out the need for improvement in health care coverage for children. We applaud the governor's focus on expanding health care coverage for children.

His recently announced initiatives are solid first steps. We encourage him — and the Legislature — to go further to ensure the children of this state have access to quality, affordable and secure health care.

Your editorial noted the governor's efforts would insure 3,000 more children, leaving 87,000 Oregon children still without health insurance. Fewer children in Oregon qualify for health care coverage than in other states because Oregon is one of 10 states with the most restrictive

income eligibility standards for children in its public health insurance program.

With health care costs increasing at unsustainable rates and more employers dropping coverage for dependents, children are becoming uninsured at even

higher rates. As a state we need to take swift action to guarantee that all children in Oregon have access to the health care they need to grow up strong, healthy and able to learn.

The state should make administrative changes with the goal of enrolling and retaining more eligible children. This means expanded outreach, especially to working families. Linking enrollment in the Oregon Health Plan with school programs, such as the free and reduced-price lunch program, will make it easier for parents to be aware of health care programs for their

children.

But improving outreach isn't enough. More can be done to simplify the enrollment process. The state should make applications easier for parents to complete. Also, as thousands of very low-income parents lose their Oregon Health Plan Standard coverage, the state has an obligation to make it crystal clear to these parents that their children are still eligible for health care coverage.

The governor and legislative leaders also need to address policies that are impeding our goal of healthy children. Requiring re-enrollment in the Oregon Health Plan once a year instead of every six months will help more children retain their health care coverage. We can also focus on cost-effective preventive care by eliminating the requirement that families be uninsured for six months in order to qualify for programs.

Ultimately, reducing the number of uninsured children in Oregon is a fiscal win

for the state. Children cost less to insure. Access to preventive care saves money. And increasing the income guidelines so more low-income children are eligible for coverage is a sensible use of our limited resources because the federal government provides \$1.71 for every \$1 supplied by the state for children's health care coverage.

The governor's commitment to prioritize children's health care coverage is the right goal for Oregon. The governor and legislative leaders should develop a plan to guarantee access to health care for all children by 2006, thus ensuring a healthy foundation for our state's future.



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