

Anchorage Daily News

Our view: Denali KidCare

State leaders promise to push for more children's health insurance

Published: October 4th, 2009

Legislators and activists campaigning to expand state-funded health insurance for children will get some important help this year. Gov. Sean Parnell and his administration will actively join the fight, say administration officials.

This is great news.

Right now, Alaska's health insurance for pregnant women and children in lower- and middle-income families is sub-standard compared to other states. While most states cover kids in families with incomes at twice the federal poverty rate or even higher, Alaska's insurance is limited to households earning up to 175 percent of the federal poverty rate, or \$40,057 for a family of three.

A bill to increase the eligibility level to 200 percent passed the Senate in the 2009 session, but not the House.

A group drawn from Anchorage churches, Anchorage Faith and Action, Congregations Together (AFACT), sponsored a meeting last week to ask the governor to commit to leading an effort to get past the roadblock.

Alaska Health and Social Services Commissioner Bill Hogan, speaking for the governor, said they'll do it.

The governor definitely supports increasing eligibility to 200 percent, and would consider going higher than that with some sort of cost-sharing by participants, said Hogan. For example, people with incomes above 200 percent might pay premiums to buy in to the program, or make co-pays, said Hogan.

At the AFACT meeting at Central Lutheran Church, he heard people testify that were making just a couple hundred extra dollars per year, and so couldn't qualify for the state-funded insurance, Hogan said.

"That's why going above 200 (percent) with some cost-sharing makes some sense to me."

Bills to accomplish exactly that have been held up in the Legislature the past two years.

The Parnell administration's enthusiasm for the increase is an improvement over the former administration of Gov. Sarah Palin, who didn't campaign or work for increased children's health insurance. A strong push from the governor's office could make all the difference.

BOTTOM LINE: Children in families of the working poor have some valuable new allies. Hopefully, they'll help blast a bill out of the Legislature.