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GOVERNMENT

Gregoire: Kids' health care effort threatened

Governor asks Congress to block new, complicated federal directive

LES BLUMENTHAL

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A new federal directive could undermine Washington state's effort to provide medical coverage to all children, Gov. Chris Gregoire told a House panel Tuesday.

Washington is one of nine states that has challenged the directive, issued late last summer by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Gregoire asked Congress to block its implementation.

"It's vital that federal regulators stop creating onerous rules that serve only to bar states from carrying out programs whose stated goals are to ensure access to coverage for children and youth," Gregoire said in testimony before the health subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "Kids come first."

Gregoire said the directive, which involves federal poverty level eligibility guidelines, could result in 8,100 children in Washington state failing to receive coverage under the State Children's Health Insurance Program. The federal government picks up about two-thirds of the cost of the program.

In Washington state, the program currently covers children in families whose income is 250 percent of the federal poverty level. In January, that will go to 300 percent of the federal poverty level.

But the complicated new regulation requires that 95 percent of children in families whose income is 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level have to be covered before a state can expand coverage.

"The rule ensures that no state will qualify," said Gregoire, adding Washington state would come close at 94 percent.

Gregoire said that even families living at twice the federal poverty level have a hard time being able to afford health insurance. A single mother of two making \$45,000 a year, or more than 250 percent of the poverty level, has to pay for housing, food, clothing and transportation and then find \$700 to \$900 in the monthly budget for health insurance.

"In Washington state, we believe that providing health care coverage to all of our kids and making sure they have access to high-quality, affordable health care is not only the right thing to do — it is a moral imperative," Gregoire said.

Gregoire later said that every time the administration sends a letter to the states trying to clarify its directive, it only becomes more confusing.

"We have played by the rules all along and are still getting penalized," she said. "They keep changing the rules."

Les Blumenthal covers issues about Washington state from the McClatchy Washington, D.C., bureau. He can be reached at lblumenthal@mcclatchydc.com.