

Youth Medicaid debated

By JOY LUDWIG
Staff Reporter

Lincoln pediatrician Dr. Stacie Bleicher would have liked the chance to help a little girl.

But the high costs of medical care and insurance kept the girl away from the doctor's office for nearly seven years.

The result: an undetected inflamed kidney that couldn't be saved.

"They (youth) need to have a medical home, and they need to have medical care," Bleicher told the Health and Human Services Committee Wednesday in favor of a bill that would provide \$101 million to establish a children's Medicaid system in the state.

LB1063 would provide the funds over the next five years to establish a Medicaid system that would cover children up to age 19 who are in families at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

It also would provide assistance to an estimated 24,000 of 30,000 children in Nebraska who currently do not have any or adequate medical insurance.

The money would come from Congress's Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which sets aside \$76 million over the next five years as long as each state matches those funds with \$25 million.

Sen. Chris Beutler of Lincoln, who introduced the bill, said there were three

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CHRIS BEUTLER
senator

main reasons why the bill was important and how it would help the state.

"First, I believe every child deserves good health care," he said. "It's obviously not the child's fault they're not getting it."

Secondly, Beutler said the money would help keep Nebraska's economy strong. Finally, he said he believed the adults in the low-income bracket who work hard deserve adequate health care available to them, too.

As an example of the current medical care problem, Beutler said a single-parent family with an income of \$19,380 a year has only \$351 for discretionary expenditures to divide among such things as children's health insurance, savings and retirement funds.

However, he said parents usually don't have enough money to buy adequate insurance premiums and leftover income is spent on other necessities.

"As you can see, most families at this level cannot afford health insurance," Beutler said.

Thirty-four other Nebraska senators have pledged support for the bill.

Gov. Ben Nelson said he thought the bill would improve the health care of low-income families and provide a higher quality of life to them.

"It must be viewed as an investment in our society and an investment in them," Nelson said. However, Omaha Sen. Jim Jensen said he was concerned about what would happen after five years — the time allotted for states to receive federal funds.

Deb Thomas, policy secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services, said one of the key elements of the program deals with outreach to the children, called Kid's Connection, "Reaching For a Healthy Future."

As part of the program, Thomas said people would have to work with schools, pediatricians and community action agencies to find out names of the children who need medical assistance because the Department of Education cannot provide such a list.

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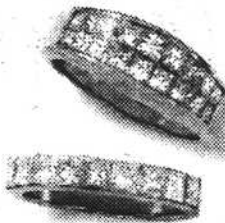
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