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San Jose Mercury News
December 6, 2000

Supervisors approve plan for children's insurance 71,000 Uninsured in Santa Clara County Could Get Medical, Dental Coverage

Section: Local
Edition: Morning Final
Page: 1B
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Correction: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 12/09/00, pg. 2A) An article on Wednesday in some local sections about Santa Clara County's Children's Health Initiative incorrectly identified the agency that pledged \$2 million to the program. The agency is the Santa Clara County Children and Families First Commission, an independent entity, which administers the county's share of statewide tobacco tax revenue.

Santa Clara County supervisors Tuesday approved a first-in-the-nation plan to ensure that every child in the county has health insurance.

Under the Children's Health Initiative, the 71,000 children in the county estimated to be uninsured could receive coverage for a full range of services, including vision, dental and comprehensive medical care.

"I do believe that we are on the brink of doing something incredibly powerful and helpful," said Supervisor Blanca Alvarado.

Supervisors had committed to the goal of guaranteed health coverage for the county's children in October. But on Tuesday, they approved a concrete plan to carry out their concept beginning early next year.

Santa Clara Family Health Plan, the county's Medi-Cal HMO, will administer the health initiative. It will process applications from families, pay claims, contract for outreach and handle fundraising.

The county expects to begin enrolling families Jan. 2, and to start operations in February. Anyone up to age 19 is guaranteed coverage under the \$14 million-a-year initiative.

Already, the county has pledged \$2 million a year of the tobacco tax money it expects to get as a result of Proposition 10, a 1998 state initiative that collects money for childhood programs. It is expected to formally approve an additional \$3 million in tobacco settlement money next week. Its aim is to tap employers, individuals and foundations for the remaining \$9 million a year needed to insure every child.

"To reach 100 percent funding . . . is going to require a historic public-private partnership," said Bob Brownstein of Working Partnerships USA, an advocacy group for the county's working poor. Working Partnerships initially floated the idea of the initiative, along with the group People Acting in Community Together.

Since San Jose has the largest number of uninsured children in Santa Clara County, initiative officials will be looking to the city for major backing.

This summer, the San Jose City Council narrowly voted down a similar proposal, which would have provided

health coverage to all the city's uninsured kids.

Mayor Ron Gonzales, who led opposition to that plan, said the city had no experience in managing such a program. However, the task force he appointed to study how the city should spend its tobacco settlement money recently recommended allocating \$750,000 to the county's health initiative through June 2001, and more in years to come.

"They're basically recommending giving us what we're asking for," said Leona Butler, chief executive officer of the Santa Clara Family Health Plan.

The San Jose City Council is to vote on the task force recommendations next Tuesday.

A major obstacle for the county will be reaching the families of the 71,000 children thought to be uninsured, and enrolling them, said Supervisor Jim Beall.

"We still have the big challenge of finding all these kids," said Beall, who along with Alvarado led the county's efforts for the insurance initiative.

More than 50,000 of the county's uninsured kids are thought to be eligible for, but not enrolled in, state and federal health care programs. The remaining 20,000 are children of the working poor, whose parents don't qualify for government aid but cannot afford health insurance. The Children's Health Initiative will pay the lion's share of insurance premiums for these children, with each family expected to kick in at most \$18 a month.

Other public agencies have tried in the past to locate uninsured families -- with little success. But Health Initiative officials say they will do better. They plan to partner with churches and schools to reach out to these families.

The Santa Clara Family Health Plan also is working to streamline the intimidating application process families often face when they apply for Medi-Cal.

"My goal is to have a two-page form that is simple and unintimidating," Butler said.

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