POLICY & PRACTICE

Boost in SCHIP Funds

Help is on the way for states facing empty children's health care budgets. The Department of Health and Human Services is redistributing $643 million in unspent 2002 funds for the State Children's Health Insurance Program. "I am very pleased that we can take action to prevent any loss or break in coverage because program funds weren't being used by states that need them the most," said Mark McClellan, M.D., administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Twenty-eight states will be getting supplemental funds under this action. Without it, five states—Arizona, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Rhode Island—would have run out of federal funding for their SCHIP programs, according to HHS. Even with the redistribution, Dr. McClellan said he expected to complete fiscal year 2005 with more than $5 billion in unspent federal matching funds.

Compensation for Vaccine Injuries

The National Vaccine Injury Compensation program (VICP) will now cover injuries related to the hepatitis A vaccine. Hepatitis A is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the United States, and causes an estimated 125,000-200,000 cases per year. The vaccine is recommended for children in certain states and high-incidence communities, in addition to people with chronic diseases or for those traveling to countries where the disease is common. Most people who receive the hepatitis A vaccine don't experience serious problems. However, those who believe they've been injured by the vaccine must file a claim within 3 years of the first symptom of the vaccine injury or within 2 years of the vaccine-related death, but not more than 4 years after the start of the first symptom of the vaccine-related injury from which the death occurred. Administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration, the VICP program provides financial compensation to eligible individuals thought to be injured by vaccines.

Responsible Food Marketing

The Center for Science in the Public Interest wants supermarkets, media outlets, and schools to change the way "junk food" is marketed to children. The public interest group has issued guidelines calling on companies not to market low-nutrition drinks like sodas, sports drinks, and sweetened iced teas to children. Further, foods marketed to children should have reasonable portion sizes, and provide some basic nutrients. "What we're really asking is that marketers act responsibly and not urge kids to eat foods that could harm their health," said Margo G. Wootan, CSPI's nutrition policy director. CSPI's guidelines were sent to supermarkets, major food companies, chain restaurants, television networks and stations, movie studios, and children's magazines. Meanwhile, the National Automatic Merchandising Association released its own initiative to fight childhood obesity, promoting a color-coded snack food rating system in school vending machines.

Secondhand Smoke Campaign

In another campaign to improve children's health, the American Legacy Foundation is asking parents to create smoke-free environments for their families. According to the Foundation's research, more than 13 million children in the United States are breathing secondhand smoke in their homes, resulting in serious health implications. In 82% of the cases where a young person lives with a smoker, that smoker is a parent. In television and radio public service announcements, the campaign urges parents to keep their homes and cars smoke-free and refrain from smoking around children. The foundation is based in Washington and develops programs that address the health effects of tobacco use. A previous foundation report found that a small reduction in tobacco smoke exposure would result in fewer low-birthweight babies and fewer cases of asthma and ear infections.

Medicaid's Benefits to the States

An annual fiscal survey of the states failed to examine the benefit of Medicaid to the states' economies, according to Families USA. The report released by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Association of State Budget Officers indicated that state spending for Medicaid, including federal funds, has surpassed state spending on primary and secondary education. Yet in examining state general fund expenditures, states spent more than twice as much on education than they did on Medicaid. "When analyzing the NGA survey's findings on Medicaid, it is important to count the economic benefit that Medicaid holds for states," said Families USA Executive Director Ron Pollack. "A recent Families USA study found that on average every $1 million invested in Medicaid by states generates nearly 34 jobs, $1.2 million in wages, and $3.3 million in business activity," he added.

—Jennifer Silverman