Arizona leaders should stop the automatic freeze on KidsCare

BY DANA NAIRMARK

Arizona is the only state planning to freeze KidsCare enrollment—again. KidsCare now provides affordable health care coverage to nearly 30,000 children in working families, connecting them with the check-ups, immunizations, treatment and prescriptions they need to grow up healthy.

Current state law has a trigger that immediately freezes KidsCare enrollment when federal funding dips to a 90 percent match in October 2019. A bill to remove the automatic freeze and put control back in the state Legislature to determine any state funding for KidsCare passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support, but never got a vote in the Senate.

In his State of the State address this year, Gov. Doug Ducey proudly reminded us that he, “acted to prevent 24,530 low-income children from getting health insurance cancellation notices days before Christmas” when the federal funding had expired. He went on to criticize Congress for its inaction.


Surprisingly, Congress did its job and reauthorized federal funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for an additional 10 years. But the governor left Arizona families facing uncertainty and loss of health care coverage.

KidsCare has never been an open-ended program. Governor Jane Hull designed it so that enrollment is based on the combination of available federal and state funds.

The Legislature controls the cost and enrollment through appropriations. But it’s dangerous for families and costly to our state to freeze out every single child who applies and turn over federal tax dollars over to children in other states.

Ducey is correct when he calls KidsCare a work program. It’s designed for working families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid/AHCCCS but can’t afford private insurance. Families who are covered by Medicaid/AHCCCS when they are just starting out, or when they fall on hard times, can transition to KidsCare as they get better-paying jobs and move up the economic ladder.

Parents can count on affordable coverage for their children as they earn promotions or start new careers that can better support their families. KidsCare also encourages entrepreneurship: research from the Harvard Business School finds that families with CHIP coverage had a 23 percent higher rate of self-employment and a 31 percent higher rate of ownership of incorporated businesses.

It’s hard to believe that some politicians don’t think children’s health is worth a small investment of state funds to get nine times more in a federal investment. The payoff is better health and learning by protecting children from chronic conditions like asthma, disabling injuries, dental and vision problems, and life-threatening illnesses.

We have one more chance during the 2019 legislative session to keep KidsCare open. Will the leaders we elect in November stand up for children’s health? During this summer and fall, voters across the state will be asking candidates who are running for governor and the Legislature what they will do to prevent another KidsCare freeze.

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