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Growing number of Kansas children in poverty and without health coverage

By Mike Shields
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TOPEKA — A growing number of Kansas children — nearly 40 percent — live in low-income or poverty-stricken households, according to a report released today.

The annual Kansas [KIDS COUNT report](#) has been produced for the past 17 years by Kansas Action for Children, a Topeka-based advocacy group.

Among other findings in this year's report:

- More than 42 percent of Kansas school children participate in free or subsidized lunch programs.
- Nationally, the number of children without health insurance has been declining, but in Kansas an additional 20,000 children joined the ranks of the medically uninsured between 2005 and 2008. The total grew to almost 72,000 children or almost one in 10.

"It really is a startling increase," said Kansas Action for Children President Gary Brunk, talking about the growing number of children without health coverage. "And we have to wonder what the data is going to look like next year when it really reflects the depth of the recession. The trend on these indicators is very bad."

According to the report, the "overwhelming majority" of Kansas children who lack health coverage are eligible for the state's HealthWave program but for a variety of reasons are not enrolled. HealthWave provides government financed or subsidized health coverage for children in low- and moderate-income families.

"The best approach to addressing the state's increased rate of uninsured children is two-fold," the report's authors concluded. "We need to focus on outreach efforts to ensure that more Kansas families enroll their children in HealthWave. But, we also need to place an emphasis on retaining eligible children who are already enrolled in HealthWave."

Brunk said Kansas should take steps to discourage the number of children "churning" in and out of HealthWave by simplifying enrollment and renewal for the program.

He said some states have streamlined renewals by allowing parents to do it over the phone. And some states have "paperless" systems for determining income eligibility. For example, a parent's tax filings with one agency can be used to confirm income for the state's children's health program.

Brunk said those sorts of measures can build retention and also decrease the state's administrative costs.

"Some other states have done a much better job," he said.

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The Kansas Health Policy Authority oversees the state's HealthWave program but currently has very limited outreach efforts, agency officials said.

"Until now, much of (the outreach) has been done by (Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services) in conjunction with other social service programs, but they have had budget cutbacks this year as well," said health policy authority spokesman Peter Hancock. "Currently, both agencies, KHPA and SRS, are putting all their available resources into processing incoming applications. KHPA still has a sizable backlog of applications, so clearly people are finding us."

The agency recently was awarded a federal grant of \$40.3 million over five years to upgrade the antiquated computer system it uses to process applications for HealthWave and Medicaid, which it also oversees. That new system will take a few years to become fully operational. The grant money also will allow for hiring outreach workers who will help enroll people at the state's safety net clinics.

Agency head Andrew Allison said there also are some new federal guidelines in the pipeline that might allow the state to improve its outreach efforts.

"We expect the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to issue guidelines very soon on new express-lane eligibility processes that are intended to make it easier to get children enrolled," Allison said. "When those guidelines become available, we plan to review them thoroughly to see how that might work in Kansas."

Brunk said there also was some good news in this year's KIDS COUNT report.

There is more exposure to early childhood education programs.

"One thing we're happy about is that more kids in Kansas have access to Early Head Start and pre kindergarten programs," he said. "That's very important for the long term. Kids are going into 1st grade better prepared for school."

Brunk said Kansas school children also are "increasingly meeting reading standards," which he said helps set the stage for later successes.

"The other positive indicators have been tobacco use and drinking are declining among Kansas teens," he said. "I don't know what to attribute that to, but it's good news nevertheless."

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