

Settlement means better medical care for poor kids

State to fatten reimbursements for Medicaid doctors

BY STEVE PATTERSON
Staff Reporter

State officials agreed Monday to a multimillion-dollar upgrade in basic medical care given to Cook County's poorest children.

In settling a 13-year-old lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court, the state agreed to provide greater reimbursements to doctors who accept Medicaid patients.

Many doctors turn away new Medicaid patients, because the amount physicians get for providing that care is far less than what they would get from private insurance companies, the suit claimed.

With private insurance, a doctor could be reimbursed for up to twice the amount reimbursed by Medicaid, a government-funded medical insurance program for the poor. Now, however, the amount will be increased to similar funding levels.

Equal access, quality care

The suit — brought by Health and Disability Advocates, the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law and the Chicago law firm Goldberg Kohn, which han-

dled the case pro bono — focused on the lack of "equal access" to quality care that Medicaid-eligible children in Cook County received.

Attorney Fred Cohen said many "doctors decide where to locate their practices" based on whether they're more likely to see patients using Medicaid or private insurance, limiting the medical resources available in the county's poorer neighborhoods.

Checkups, required annually for Medicaid-eligible children, are often skipped because of that lack of access, the suit says.

But the gap created by that lack of services is expected to be filled by the settlement, in which the state agreed to increase Medicaid funding by \$45 million, and by new state outreach programs, said Becky Carroll, a spokeswoman for the governor's budget office.

The amount spent could increase substantially, however, as doctors take advantage of the increased reimbursements, as well as opportunities for "bonus" payments for "providing regular, consistent" medical care to children using Medicaid, the groups said.

Cohen praised Gov. Blagojevich for finding funding to make the settlement happen, but cautioned "this agreement is just one step," while HDA's Stephanie Altman said it puts poor children "on equal footing with children who are privately insured."