

AL: Medicaid Rule Hits Citizens Hardest Law Aimed At Barring Illegal Immigrants From Aid Boots Poorest Americans Off Rolls

Birmingham News, May 27, 2007

By Kim Chandler and Mary Orndorf

A new federal law designed to prevent illegal immigrants from signing up for Medicaid has kicked more than 5,000 people off the rolls in Alabama, but only 115 of them are Hispanic, according to state data.

Advocates for the poor argue that the new rule is hitting the wrong people - poor Americans.

More than 5,000 people have been terminated from Medicaid for failing to provide a birth certificate or other proof of citizenship, according to data from the Alabama Medicaid Agency.

Children were the largest group affected; 2,081 black children and 1,213 white children were removed from Medicaid.

"This was a predictable consequence," said U.S. Rep. Artur Davis, D-Birmingham. "I felt that, if we tried to apply a requirement of paperwork and documentation, a lot of people who weren't going to have it were senior citizens and low-income minorities."

In Alabama, 527,400 people were subject to the new requirement. Some Medicaid recipients, including disabled adults and children and foster children, were exempt from the rule.

Hispanics comprised 6 percent of the Medicaid rolls affected by the new rule, but they accounted for 2 percent of the patients dropped from Medicaid. Black Alabamians comprised 48 percent of the affected group and accounted for nearly 60 percent of the 527,400 who dropped.

The new law was part of the Deficit Reduction Act, which Davis voted against. A 2005 inspector general's report found most states don't verify the citizenship status of those applying for Medicaid, creating an opportunity for illegal immigrants to join the government health-care program.

However, Alabama Medicaid Commissioner Carol Steckel said she did not believe the state had a large problem with illegal immigrants fraudulently signing up for benefits.

"I've only had one identified that's gotten on that shouldn't have," Steckel said.

Verification lacking

Medicaid recipients declare their race and ethnicity when they apply for benefits. No state worker verifies the information, but Steckel said there's no indication of widespread

misrepresentation.

Steckel said she's proud of the work her employees did to get people back on the rolls. As of February, 12,000 to 13,000 people were going to be dropped from the Medicaid rolls for lack of proper paperwork.

Steckel credited outreach efforts by her staff, work of the legislative Black Caucus and cooperation from the Alabama Department of Public Health in obtaining birth certificates. Primary-care doctors in Medicaid's Patient First program also did a great deal to help their patients get the documents they needed, Steckel said.

She said her workers, who had the highest individual caseloads in the country, have been overwhelmed trying to help Medicaid families verify their citizenship - so much so that there is a delay in processing new applications.

It is unknown why Americans and legal immigrants who lost their Medicaid coverage did not produce verifying documents, whether lack of transportation, income, effort or some other reason.

"There are a lot of people in this society who are marginalized because of their education level or income level," Davis said. "They don't go to the airport to rent a car, eat at fancy restaurants with a credit card or have 15 credit cards, which are things that people in Washington take for granted."

Davis did call the statute well intentioned, saying "certainly illegal immigrants shouldn't get Medicaid."

Immigration-reform advocates have applauded efforts to verify citizenship.

"Publicly funded programs should not be provided to people illegally in the country," said Jack Martin, director of special projects for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a nonprofit group that advocates tougher immigration laws.

The organization has not taken a position on the Medicaid citizenship requirement, but Martin said there is evidence that some illegal immigrants use ID theft to obtain benefits.

Extent unknown

A difficulty, Martin said, is that government officials don't know how widespread the problem is of illegal immigrants using Medicaid.

In Alabama, advocates for the poor said, it's not much of a problem.

"It turns out this was a big false alarm in terms of Medicaid abuse by undocumented aliens," said Jim Carnes, a policy analyst with Alabama Arise, an advocacy group for the poor.

Alabama does provide some medical coverage for illegal immigrants. The state Medicaid program pays for emergency medical care such as births, as required by the federal government.

From January to March, Medicaid paid for 7,263 deliveries, 657 of them for undocumented immigrants.

"It's a small number, but it's growing," Steckel said. Alabama, like most other states does not pay for prenatal care for pregnant undocumented immigrants.

No national data was available to compare the demographics of people losing health coverage because of the citizenship requirements. But some states reflect a similar trend to that in Alabama.

According to the publication Inside CMS, a similar analysis in Oregon found that the new law has denied coverage among English-speaking beneficiaries at least as much as it has among Spanish speakers.

Alabama does not collect data on the primary language of Medicaid applicants.

"This is exactly what we were afraid of," Carnes said. "By far it's disproportionately affecting children, and the largest single group is African-American children."

EMAIL: kchandler@bhamnews