

Poor being denied Medicaid over citizenship rule, some say

Saturday, February 03, 2007

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The number of poor in Ohio receiving the free government-funded health care called Medicaid is dropping.

But it's not good news, say those who help the needy.

Ohio's Medicaid roll dropped by more than 22,000 from August to December of 2006, the most recent numbers available.

The decline, say advocates for the poor, isn't because the state has fewer people in need. It's because Congress created a roadblock last year when it said those who want Medicaid must first prove they're U.S. citizens.

That's not always easy to do, especially when you're poor, the advocates say. And the result is that some citizens are being denied a benefit they're entitled to.

"It's a very serious, troubling turn of events," said Bob Bonthius, senior staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

"What it means is that poor and low-income individuals and families who are likely to be eligible for Medicaid are being denied Medicaid on a technicality.

"And in many of these situations people will be denied or delayed for reasons completely beyond their control - they don't have the money to buy the proof [of citizenship], they don't know how to buy the proof, the proof doesn't exist, they're not able to get the proof from the agency that's got the proof, or any other myriad reasons."

The issue was highlighted in a report released Friday by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., which conducts research on low- and moderate-income families.

The report focused on six states - Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Virginia and Wisconsin - and found all showed significant drops in the number of Medicaid recipients since the citizenship requirement was implemented.

National data is not available yet, the report said. But states not in the study, including Ohio, are showing similar declines.

In August, 1,759,003 people were receiving Medicaid in Ohio, according to state officials. The citizenship requirement went into effect Sept. 25. By December, the number had fallen to 1,736,252.

While the decreases aren't huge, they follow month after month of increases. And the state projected those increases would continue through December, said Jon Allen, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services.

There's no proof that the citizenship requirement is responsible for the decline, Allen said.

"We're not aware of any other factor that might be responsible," he said. "But we also can't say at this point it's absolutely because of this change."

The numbers, he said, are something the state will monitor.

"We have been concerned from the very beginning. If people are eligible for benefits, we want to make sure they receive those benefits. But we're also bound to follow the requirements the federal government puts into place."

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