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Editorial

The Medicaid Documentation Mess

Exaggerated fears that illegal immigrants are fraudulently receiving Medicaid health benefits have led to a crackdown that is preventing tens of thousands of American citizens from obtaining legitimate coverage. Congress, whose mindless actions led to this travesty, needs to fix this injustice.

The problem was triggered by last year's Deficit Reduction Act, which contained provisions requiring applicants for Medicaid, a health insurance program for the poor, to show proof of their citizenship and identity when they apply for or seek to renew coverage. That may not seem unreasonable since eligibility is generally limited to American citizens and certain qualified aliens. But previously most states had simply asked applicants to declare in writing — under penalty of perjury — that they were citizens or qualified immigrants.

Now they must submit specified documents, such as birth certificates and passports, which many have difficulty tracking down or paying for. The Bush administration added to the difficulties by requiring people to submit original documents or copies certified by the issuing agency, not simply other copies they might have at hand.

The more stringent documentation was the brainchild of two Republican congressmen from Georgia. Never mind that there was little evidence that illegal immigrants were defrauding the program. Now the fruits of that policy are becoming visible. As Robert Pear recently wrote in *The Times*, at least seven states have reported declines in Medicaid enrollments and traced them to the new requirements. It is hard to be sure how many illegal immigrants were screened out, but state officials think the number is small. Florida believes that nearly all of the people it has excluded for failure to produce documents are American citizens.

The most appalling impact falls on infants born to illegal immigrants whose deliveries were paid for by Medicaid. They are American citizens under the 14th Amendment simply by virtue of being born here and used to be covered automatically for a year. Now they must wait until their skittish parents obtain a birth certificate before they can get vital infant care that should begin at birth.

Congress needs to move quickly to fix this problem. At a minimum, every poor infant born here ought to be automatically enrolled in Medicaid. Congress also needs to simplify the Medicaid application process instead of making it more onerous. That would be fairer to qualified applicants and could help reduce the ranks of the uninsured.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/19/opinion/19mon1.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print