

Scorecard serves as a wake-up call on health future for Nevada children

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

The Commonwealth Fund's recently released "State Scorecard on Child Health System Performance 2011" provides a serious wake-up call for those concerned with securing a healthy future for children in Nevada as we head into the 2011 legislative session.

The Scorecard should also serve notice to those who preach to us about the need for public investments that lay the foundation for a strong workforce and economy, yet who routinely fail to deliver the goods.

The report details Nevada's dismal performance on numerous measures of children's access to care, health care quality, health status, and equity, and provides a compelling companion piece to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual Kids Count Data Book which ranks states on 10 key indicators of child health and well being.

Combined, these data highlight the key role health systems play in ensuring that children get a healthy start so they can lead long, healthy, and productive lives. Both reveal that Nevada fails its children miserably.

In particular, the Scorecard indicates that, among US states and the District of Columbia, Nevada ranks 48th for children's health insurance coverage and access, 51st for the effectiveness of primary and preventive care delivered to kids, 43rd for the degree to which Nevada's children enjoy long and healthy lives, and 51st in terms of equity or the degree to which our state's health care system performs for its youngest and most vulnerable residents. Our overall, composite rank is 51st or the bottom of the barrel.

The most salient take away from the report is the absolute importance of health insurance coverage.

Health insurance coverage is closely related to the chances that a child will have a medical home or a usual source of sick care and an ongoing, regular relationship with a primary care provider who assumes responsibility for coordinating all health services for the child – particularly those kids who have special needs or a chronic condition like asthma.

Nevada ranks 49th in the percent of children who are insured, 47th in the percent of insured children whose coverage is inadequate to meet their medical needs, and, to no great surprise, dead last in percent of children with a medical home – only 45.4 percent of Nevada kids have a medical home. Making matters worse, Nevada currently has the lowest Medicaid/Child Health Insurance Program

participation rate of any US state – according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 55.4 percent of eligible low-income children are enrolled in these public insurance programs.

Having a medical home, in turn, is closely related to the receipt of effective primary care and timely preventive care, such as well-child examinations, preventive dental care, mental health counseling when its needed, and routine developmental screening.

At the end of the day, health insurance coverage matters mightily.

Most of the data presented in the Scorecard was collected prior to the passage of the Affordable Care Act last March. It is thus rich listening members of Congress with six-figure incomes and federally-financed health insurance, not to mention our new Governor and scores of state lawmakers, bemoan the horrors of Obamacare and any further expansion of public health insurance programs.

It's also worth noting that the same Republican members of the Nevada congressional delegation who predictably voted against the Affordable Care Act last year, also opposed in bloc the reauthorization of the Children's Health Insurance Program in 2009 and the reauthorization of child nutrition programs in 2010.

Meanwhile, 17 percent of Nevada kids and nearly 1 in 4 adult Nevadans lack health insurance coverage – figures that have undoubtedly worsened as the economy has tanked.

Much of the upcoming budget battles in both Carson City and Washington will be framed in terms of whether or not we can afford existing public programs and services, such as health insurance programs for low-income children and other vulnerable populations, and thus when and where we should begin cutting.

The Commonwealth Fund report indicates that we already pay a very dear price for our state's miserly approach to child health insurance coverage and access to care. Its findings suggest that further cuts will not only undermine the health and well being of our children and most vulnerable residents, they will erode the future productivity of our state's workforce.

So cut and oppose and repeal any public investment in our children's health system if you must. But, please, just don't tell us you're doing it for the children or the next generation of tax payers in Nevada.

The Commonwealth Fund's Scorecard can be downloaded at www.commonwealthfund.org. Kids Count state-level data and rankings on child health and well-being can be found at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org> and <http://kidscount.unlv.edu>.

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