

CHIP legislation step in right direction, but more still needed, say border leaders

By David A. Díaz
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The expansion of CHIP, the Children's Health Insurance Program, to almost 130,000 more children ranks among the biggest victories for working families to come out of the recently concluded 80th session of the Texas Legislature, say state and border leaders.

"The issue of the uninsured continues to plague all areas of our state," said Speaker of the House Tom Craddick, R-Midland, whose support for the measure was vital for its passage.

"I was pleased that members of the House and Senate were able to work together in a bipartisan manner to identify barriers in the Children's Health Insurance Program while maintaining the integrity of program participation on behalf of taxpayers," the top House leader added.

House Bill 109, by Rep. Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, which included Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, as a joint author, was signed into law by Gov. Rick Perry on Friday, June 15. Sen. Kip Averitt, R-Waco, was the Senate sponsor of the measure.

Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, Sen. Elliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, and Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, were among the Senate cosponsors of HB 109.

HB 109 extends CHIP coverage to one year, eliminates the 90-day waiting period, allows families to deduct child-care expenses, and expands the asset limits for the program, according to a bill analysis of the legislation. Families earning more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level will have an income review at their sixth month of coverage.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, which administers the program, estimated that these changes will increase CHIP enrollment by almost 130,000 children.

TBC's key role

The Texas Border Coalition, an alliance of elected city and county leaders, along with economic development officials, representing more than two million people who live in the 11 Texas counties that border

Mexico, had been a major supporter of HB 109.

El Paso County County Attorney José R. Rodríguez, who chairs TBC's Committee on Border Health, said the governor's approval is a major step in the right direction.

"This is beneficial to border communities because we can get more children covered with health insurance," said Rodríguez. "However, we should not forget that this just brings back half of the children that were dropped from the rolls during the 2003 session. In other words, we had over 200,000 children dropped because of those cuts. HB 109 merely restores half of those children back to the insurance program, and we need to continue working to get all the eligible children covered."

"A \$10 billion state budget shortfall that year was blamed for dramatically cutting funding for CHIP, along with scores of other state programs, as the Republican-led Legislature looked for ways to avoid any significant state tax increases."

The Texas border has the highest rates of uninsured in the nation, approximately one third of the population, he said.

"HB 109 represents not only more health insurance coverage for children, thus closing the gap on the uninsured, but also an investment in the healthy workforce Texas needs to compete in the global economy," Rodríguez said. "Because the border has the fastest growing young population in the nation, it is good public policy to invest in the healthcare of America's future workers."

In addition to Rodríguez, other members of TBC include Eagle Pass Mayor Chad Foster, who serves as TBC chairman; Cameron County Judge Carlos H. Cascos; Edinburg Mayor Joe Ochoa; El Paso Mayor John Cook; Hidalgo Mayor John David Franz; Laredo Mayor Raúl Salinas; Maverick County Judge José Pepe Aranda; McAllen Mayor Richard Cortéz; Mission Mayor Norberto Salinas; Pharr Mayor Leopoldo Palacios, Jr; Rio Grande City Mayor Kevin Hiles; Roma Mayor Rogelio Ybarra; Val Verde County Judge Manuel "Mike" Fernández; Weslaco Mayor Joe V. Sánchez; Mike Allen of McAllen, a member of the South Texas College Board



Children's health insurance expands

Rep. Verónica González, D-McAllen, recently provided a legislative update to her constituents in McAllen, which included news that Gov. Rick Perry had signed into law a measure that will make it easier for working families in Texas to enroll their children in the popular Children's Health Insurance Program. The expansion of CHIP to almost 130,000 more children ranks among the biggest victories for health care to come out of the recently concluded 80th session of the Texas Legislature, says the Texas Border Coalition, which lobbied for the improvements to CHIP. See related story.

--Photo by David A. Díaz

of Trustees; Monica Stewart of McAllen; and Pat Townsend Jr., president and CEO of the Mission Economic Development Agency, and other community leaders.

Recovering from 2003 budget cuts

In deep South Texas, the cuts in CHIP funding by the Legislature in 2003 had a profound negative impact, said

Rep. Verónica González, D-McAllen.

González was a co-author of HB 109.

"The Rio Grande Valley saw a tremendous decline in the number of CHIP enrollees since the cutbacks in 2003, probably one of the largest declines in the entire state, she said."

CHIP is not free; it is for working families who are not poor enough for Medicaid, but

cannot afford private insurance," González explained. "Enrolling more children in CHIP is a win/win. It means more healthy children, less time and money lost by businesses whose employees are out with sick children, less backlog in our hospital emergency rooms and more money from the federal government which provides a \$2.60 match for every \$1.00 Texas spends. It is time that we as a state make it as easy as possible to assure that all children are given access to healthcare because a healthy child is a successful child."

Also, as part of the state budget approved by Perry, the Legislature approved \$2 billion in funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) – a \$1 billion increase over 2006-2007 funding levels, according to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. This includes \$698.5 million for the new CHIP perinate coverage, which expands the availability of prenatal coverage in the state. The perinate coverage, which began in January 2007, also provides CHIP coverage for the baby after birth. The eligibility limit is maintained at 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That's the same level since the program's inception in 1999.

David A. Díaz reports on major legislation that affects South Texans.