

Massachusetts Health Care Coverage Bill For Undocumented Kids Would Cost \$166 Million

By Alison Kuznitz
State House News Service

Warning undocumented children cannot wait another legislative session before potentially gaining access to government-sponsored health insurance coverage, Sen. Sal DiDomenico looked to drum up support for his proposal Thursday before a large crowd of health care advocates who visited Beacon Hill to lobby lawmakers.

Some 40,000 children and young adults under age 21 who meet eligibility criteria for MassHealth but lack coverage due to their immigration status could secure coverage under bills from DiDomenico and Rep. Dave Rogers (S 740 / H 1237), a DiDomenico aide said.

Without any dissenting votes, the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing reported the bills out favorably in October to the Senate Ways and Means Committee, where Democrats last session took no further action on the so-called "Cover All Kids Act."

"We can't wait two more years to file this bill again because a whole group of children are not going to have access to health care, or eye glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs, medication," said DiDomenico (D-Everett).

The renewed advocacy comes as Massachusetts continues to deal with a flood of new arrivals seeking emergency shelter here, with state costs expected to hit \$1 billion this fiscal year

and next year.

Expanding MassHealth coverage to eligible, undocumented youth under 21 would cost more than \$100 million. Suzanne Curry, director of policy and government relations at advocacy group Health Care for All, has pegged the price at \$112 million with about 31,000 children enrolling and \$166 million with about 48,000 children enrolling.

Asked whether the state could afford the MassHealth expansion given the recent weak growth in tax collections, DiDomenico said the budget encompasses the state's values.

"If we're trying to provide health care for our kids and make sure that we pick up the most vulnerable among us, this is the bill. So if we say government works for everybody in the state, then this bill will prove that, and you know, the cost in my mind is something we can absorb," DiDomenico told the News Service.

He added, "If you don't agree with giving them health care, then the other side of this is it's costing you more in the long run for not providing these things upfront. For folks that say we don't want to explore this possibility, we are paying for it many times over in a different way, and so the cost that we put upfront is actually less than the burden on our health care system than it would be otherwise."

Existing state law denies MassHealth coverage to most undocumented youth, said Attorney General Andrea Campbell, who estimated that population at between nearly 30,000 to 50,000 individuals. Massachusetts and New Hampshire are the only New England states that haven't expanded state health insurance access for all children, Campbell said.

"Sadly, children requiring urgent and essential medical treatment, either due to complex disabilities or other significant health care needs, don't have access to the very things that will save their life, or at least give them

everything they need to thrive, simply due to circumstances outside of their control due to the immigration status of their families,” Campbell said.

The economics of the legislation is a “no-brainer,” the attorney general said, asserting that the state will benefit from health care savings due to fewer emergency room visits, hospitalizations and disability benefit payments.

Dr. Alexandra Santana Almansa, a neurology fellow at Boston Children’s Hospital, recounted how a young boy was repeatedly admitted to the hospital after he couldn’t obtain epilepsy medicine to prevent seizures.

“It wasn’t a rare medication – it was medication that we use in many of our patients,” she said. “But because of his immigration status, he was not able to get the medication that he needed.”