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Better promote health program

The gap between the halls of government and the places where people live can be huge. How, for example, can there be so little awareness of the Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program?

Especially now, with more than one in 10 working Kentuckians out of a job, families need to know about KCHIP (pronounced K-chip), which provides health insurance for children whose parents' incomes are too high to qualify for Medicaid.

The program could be a lifesaver for families who lose their health insurance or can't afford to keep it when a parent becomes unemployed.

And yet, just 12 miles from the Capitol, doctors, dentists and pharmacists had little information about KCHIP and couldn't distinguish between it and Medicaid, a group of health-care advocates discovered. The staffs of churches, schools, the food pantry and public agencies were interested but out of the loop.

The case study in Anderson County is revealing and no doubt typical. Word just isn't getting out, despite Gov. Steve Beshear's promises and efforts to cover more kids.

Even when information is available, it doesn't clearly convey critical information, such as that KCHIP eligibility is based on household income not assets.

The study by the Friedell Committee for Health System Transformation recommends simplifying the enrollment process, increasing retention efforts and increasing outreach to educate the public.

KCHIP, which has been around for more than 10 years, is available to children through age 18 whose family income does not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$44,100 for a family of four.)

There are modest co-payments; those at the upper-income levels pay premiums. The federal government funds 80 percent of the program; the state pays the rest.

The administration plans to step up outreach efforts, including a back-to-school awareness campaign. That's smart. Because of the state's revenue crunch, there has to be a temptation to discourage new participation in state programs.

But scrimping on children's health care is false economy. KCHIP provides good value to taxpayers by giving kids a medical home and the regular access to doctors that can save money down the road by preventing costlier problems.