

Many Teens, Families Unaware They Qualify for Insurance

By Houkje Ross

Closing the Gap, Adolescence • November/December 2000

Teenagers and young adults are the least likely of any age group to have health insurance coverage, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. Approximately 14 percent of adolescents ages 10 to 18—4.2 million teens—are not covered by any form of health insurance. That's about 1 in 7 uninsured adolescents. For low-income and minority adolescents, the proportion is even higher.

In 1997, President Clinton signed into law the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which provides health insurance to uninsured children of low-wage working parents. All states now have an SCHIP plan in place and are working to expand the program to reach more children and teens. Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala recently approved a proposal by Hawaii to further expand its program and provide health insurance through the Hawaii SCHIP program to thousands of additional children. State officials expect this expansion of their SCHIP program to cover nearly 5,300 children by September 2001. But recent reports indicate that many parents still are not aware of the program and states have been working hard to promote the program.

"Most of the promotion for SCHIP is for younger children. Here in California I see a lot of advertisements for SCHIP that have pictures of small children, not teens" said Claire Brindis, DrPH, executive director of the National Adolescent Health Information Center. As a result, many families may not know their teen qualifies for insurance under the program.

Dr. Brindis, along with the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, co-authored the 1999 report, *Adolescents and the State Children's Health Insurance Program: Healthy Options for Meeting the Needs of Adolescents*. The study highlighted programs that are working to increase teen awareness of SCHIP. Outreach efforts in Alabama show that using adolescents to increase awareness to their uninsured peers can be a great way to get more teens insured.

Alabama Targets Adolescents for SCHIP

In 1998 local pediatrician Dr. Marsha Raulerson worked with seven local teens to conduct outreach to other teens in Escambia County, Alabama. In 6 months, Raulerson and her group were able to decrease the uninsured rate of those using the emergency room at the local hospital from 25 percent to 11 percent. "It was really their project," said Dr. Raulerson. "They decided what kind of outreach they wanted; we just acted as mentors," she added. Dr. Raulerson, an administrative assistant, and three medical students met with the teens to make sure they did things ethically.

"They were given a list of all the teens who had been to the emergency room in the last six months that were uninsured," said Dr. Raulerson. The teens mailed information about Alabama's SCHIP program, ALL Kids, to everyone on the list. Other activities included: wearing tee shirts with information about ALL Kids to school; holding meetings with local counselors, encouraging them to spread the word about ALL Kids to other adolescents; and setting up a table at a local high school that was conducting sports physical exams.

The program not only increased the number of adolescent enrollees in ALL Kids, but also enticed several teens into health care careers. "One of the students who was involved in the project is now a third year pre-med student at Alabama State University. Another student is in a physical therapy program at Alabama A&M," said Dr. Raulerson. Both students are African American.

This is important, because as the minority population increases the health care industry needs to ensure an ethnically diverse health care workforce. "So far, we have done a dismal job in ensuring this," says Dr. Brindis. Role-modeling opportunities like this can have a positive impact, she said.

*For more information on adolescents and health care or to obtain a copy of *Adolescents and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP): Healthy Options for Meeting the Needs of Adolescents*, contact Dr. Claire Brindis, National Adolescent Health Information Center (NAHIC) at (415) 502-4856. The CHIP report is also available through NAHIC's website at <http://youth.ucsf.edu/nahic>. ❖*

