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Health care for all: Gregoire's plan

Governor and legislative leaders commit to coverage within 5 years

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OLYMPIA -- Universal health care coverage for Washington residents within five years is the expensive and complicated goal Gov. Chris Gregoire and Democratic legislative leaders committed state government to on Tuesday.

Strategies include covering all children by 2010 and adding young adults through age 25, covering foster care youths past their 18th birthdays, and cracking down on emergency room overuse.

The package also proposes better use of technology, aiding businesses, finding ways to drive down costs, and expanding the state-subsidized health plan for the working poor.

The state's goal is within reach, even though the federal government has fumbled around so far, Gregoire and other leaders told a news conference.

The plan, dubbed the Healthy Washington Initiative, would cost an estimated \$142 million in the next two years. Over time, the governor said, the twin goals are to rein in costs and to make sure all Washington residents have coverage.

Almost 600,000 of Washington's 6.5 million residents, including 73,000 children, have no health insurance and others are underinsured, Gregoire said. They either go without adequate care or rely on expensive hospital emergency room care, she said.

The actual coverage would come from individuals, their employers or the government, Gregoire said. All three sectors have a responsibility, but the ultimate goal is to have individuals buying plans, rather than mandating employers to provide coverage, she said.

The state covers about 1.3 million people, including public employees, the working poor and people who qualify for Medicaid. The state covers 544,000 children and youths, and Gregoire's current budget proposal includes money to cover 32,000 more over the next two years. Lawmakers and the governor have a goal of covering all children with private or public-financed plans by 2010.

Gregoire said health care is a national crisis that cries out for a federal solution, but states are forced to step up while national politicians debate and delay. The state's plan "is not the end, but is a point along the way."

The Legislature's health committee chairwomen -- Sen. Karen Keiser, D-Kent, and Rep. Eileen Cody, D-Seattle -- said that the governor's omnibus bill will be considered by lawmakers Monday and that related legislation already is moving.

The proposal includes such things as coverage for unmarried young adults under 25, insurance plans that workers can carry from job to job, pooling of public and private markets to drive down premiums by negotiating en masse with insurers, reducing emergency room visits, and better management of chronic patients.

Minority Republicans held their own news conference to complain about being frozen out and to criticize the plan.

Sen. Cheryl Pflug, R-Maple Valley, called it "a Cadillac insurance plan" that fails to provide a range of options that would entice businesses and individuals to enroll.

HEALTHY WASHINGTON INITIATIVE

GOALS: All Washingtonians to have access to health care insurance coverage by 2012. All children to be covered by 2010. Washington to be one of the top 10 healthiest states. Health care spending won't rise faster than personal income growth.

YOUNG ADULTS: Young unmarried adults from age 19 to 25, accounting for 30 percent of the uninsured, could continue their eligibility on parents' plans, with the employer contributing or the employee paying the full cost.

BIGGER POOL: State would design a way for public and private markets to combine purchasing power to drive down insurance premiums. Employees could keep their coverage as they move from job to job.

ER USE: Studies show that half of Washington's 2.3 million emergency room visits each year are not true emergencies. The state will attempt to divert those without coverage to local clinics and other cheaper options.

OVERHEAD COSTS: The state insurance commissioner would investigate high administrative costs and suggest how to fix the problem.