

Reforms in health care may leave some in limbo

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Long before Gov. Rod Blagojevich pushed the state toward universal health care last year, some 25,000 working-poor adults had health care subsidized by the state.

Now, following Blagojevich's attempt to defy lawmakers and unilaterally implement his larger vision for health care, their coverage is at risk.

When the Blagojevich administration moved last November to expand health care to folks earning far more money than these 25,000 people, it used them as bargaining chips. When the administration ultimately failed to implement the governor's larger program, it left health care for the 25,000 lesser-earning individuals in limbo.

"They wanted to piggy back the governor's expansion onto the people that really faced some hardship here and they put everybody in an all-or-nothing proposition," said Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago.

The 25,000 adults mostly are parents of children getting publicly funded health care and they belong to a state program called FamilyCare. Each adult must earn between \$13,832 and \$19,240 annually. For a family of four, the range is \$28,196 to \$39,220.

The problem started Sept. 30 when the federal government's agreement to reimburse the state for this coverage, at an enhanced rate meaning more money for the state, expired. The administration sought to shift the class to another state/federal program, but it had to change its rules to complete the shift.

Rather than simply filing a new rule pertaining to these 25,000 people, the administration paired the necessary rule with the governor's desired program. It filed a single rule to complete the shift of the 25,000 adults and simultaneously extend health care to adults earning up to \$41,600 annually — or \$84,800, for a family of four.

Fritchey and other lawmakers on a special panel charged with reviewing rule changes said the administration married the two initiatives to leverage support for the governor's more ambitious — and highly controversial — plan. The Legislature had already refused to appropriate spending for the governor's universal health-care vision, but the governor pressed ahead anyway.

The panel members balked and twice rejected rules he proposed to greatly expand health care. They said they encouraged his administration to separate the two matters and return with a rule pertaining solely to the 25,000 working poor adults. His administration refused.

So when a Cook County judge in mid-April followed the special panel's lead and rejected the governor's program, his order also pertained to the 25,000 people who previously enjoyed health care.

The Blagojevich administration put the issues together. The judge ruled on them together.

Will doctors and other health-care providers get paid for services rendered to these 25,000 people? Could the individuals get hit with bills the state had said it would cover? Will these people continue getting coverage?

A Blagojevich administration spokeswoman, Annie Thompson, did not respond Friday to my request for comment. Next week, lawyers are back in court.

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