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Bill would extend health insurance to 17,000 undocumented immigrant children

By JOSH KOVNER
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A state social service official and advocates for children, including an undocumented Brazilian mother with a GPS bracelet living in Bridgeport, came down on different sides of a debate over a bill that would extend health insurance coverage to roughly 17,000 undocumented immigrant children.

Many of the children are now forced to use hospital emergency rooms as their primary care doctors, if they seek care at all.

The Department of Social Services opposes the bill. The agency, with a \$4.2 billion budget, would not be reimbursed by the federal government for covering the undocumented children, Deputy Commissioner Kathleen Brennan told the legislature's human services committee Tuesday. She said it would cost the state an additional \$64 million a year to include undocumented children in the Medicaid and Husky B programs.



Emily, 11, is accompanied by her mother, Dislene Battista, who testified Tuesday at the legislature in support of a bill to extend Medicaid coverage to undocumented immigrant children. Emily has cerebral palsy and her mother said she struggles to care for her. (Josh Kovner, Hartford Courant)

Five states and the District of Columbia do it anyway — New York, California, Oregon, Illinois and Washington.

And there's a "pay now or pay more later," aspect to it, children's rights lawyers, pediatricians, child protection advocates, and parents testified.

Rep. Anne Hughes, D-Easton, noted that thousands of undocumented immigrant children turn to hospital emergency rooms for the kind of medical care that other children routinely receive at the doctor's office. She said the hospital visits would drop with the expanded coverage and she told Brennan any calculation of cost should include that reduction.

As the emergency room visits decline, preventive care increases, and medical conditions that could become emergencies or lifelong afflictions are spotted and addressed, said Jay Sicklick, deputy director of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford. Sicklick placed the cost to the state at \$3.4 million in the first year, and \$15.5 million in year two and thereafter.

Dr. Rebecca Vitale, a physician in New Haven, treats children and adults.

"I see the impact on the adult side," Vitale said in testimony prepared for Tuesday's hearing. "Once a person has developed a chronic disease, they are more likely to depend on public assistance as an adult ... Increasing Husky benefits at this early stage could lead to cost savings at the state level in the future."

State Child Advocate Sarah Eagan said all children, regardless of legal status, have access to education. She said the same should hold true for health care.

Dislene Battatista said she struggles to care for her 11-year-old daughter, Emily, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. Battista arrived in Bridgeport with her daughter on Jan. 23, fleeing violence in Brazil. Her husband is detained at the border, and she was allowed to head east with a GPS bracelet. She is seeking asylum.

Speaking through an interpreter, she told the human services committee that immigrant children can be "the pride of our nation" if they can remain healthy.

Quoting Matthew 19:14, she said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."