

Panel again rejects proposed expansion of Family Care plan

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For the second time since last fall, a legislative panel threw a wrench Tuesday into Gov. Rod Blagojevich's plan to expand health-care access to 147,000 Illinoisans — an initiative he enacted even though lawmakers never approved it.

Later Tuesday, two Democratic members of the Illinois House unveiled legislation that they said would accomplish what the Democratic governor has said he wants to do by making more people eligible for the Family Care program. The legislation is House Bill 6297, sponsored by Reps. David Miller of Lynwood and John Fritchey of Chicago.

The developments were the latest in a months-long skirmish between the Blagojevich administration and the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, a bipartisan panel consisting of 12 state senators and representatives. Miller and Fritchey serve on JCAR.

Blagojevich wants to increase the number of people who have affordable access to health care through Family Care, which allows uninsured parents or guardians to qualify for discounted medical treatment.

Most JCAR members say they don't quarrel with the goal of improving access, but they question how much an enlarged Family Care program would cost and whether the financially strapped state government could afford it.

On Tuesday, JCAR voted 8-2 to reject the Department of Healthcare and Family Services' proposed rules for implementing an expanded Family Care. Reps. Brent Hassert, R-Romeoville, and Rosemary Mulligan, R-Des Plaines, provided the "no" votes.

After the vote, HFS Director Barry Maram and other agency officials quickly exited the committee room and did not stop to take reporters' questions.

But Blagojevich spokeswoman Rebecca Rausch later sent an e-mailed statement saying:

"JCAR has provided its input. We will move forward and continue to, within the parameters of the law, assist the uninsured in getting access to affordable coverage as well as helping to protect coverage for working parents within the Family Care program."

She did not respond to a follow-up e-mail inquiry asking whether the administration intends to continue signing people up for the expanded Family Care.

That's what happened late last year after JCAR blocked HFS's attempt to enact an "emergency rule" to expand income-eligibility guidelines for Family Care. Despite the panel's action, Blagojevich went ahead with the program.

A court battle ensued, with Riverside attorney Richard Caro, former Republican gubernatorial candidate Ronald Gidwitz and Greg Baise, president of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, filing a lawsuit. They say the governor overstepped his authority by expanding a program the General Assembly did not fund. The lawsuit is pending.

On Tuesday, Maram told JCAR that about 3,200 to 3,300 people have signed up for the expanded program since Dec. 1.

Shortly after that information surfaced, Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie, asked: "Under what chutzpah do you come to this body and ask us to approve a rule that we already rejected when you had the unmitigated gall to put 3,300 people on the program that you asked us to approve and we did not approve?"

Other lawmakers on JCAR also expressed dissatisfaction.

"Unfortunately, the arrogance of this administration is just breathtaking," Rep. David Leitch, R-Peoria, said after the vote. "They believe they can do whatever they want to do, including expanding very expensive health-care programs for which they have neither the legislative authority to expand nor the appropriation to pay for that expansion."

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