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Reported by Steve Jackson

Washington state lawmakers may focus their efforts on increasing health coverage for the uninsured come the next legislative session. That move couldn't come quick enough for some who say the state should have enrolled more folks in the Basic Health Plan five years ago. Steve Jackson has more:

According to the Washington State population survey, one in ten state residents, or 600 thousand people are without health insurance.

Senate majority leader Lisa Brown of Spokane says lawmakers will address that issue next session. Brown says the state Blue Ribbon commission on Health Care Has set a goal of increasing health access and quality, as well as reducing costs.

Specifics include a proposal to provide medical coverage for all of the state's children by the year 2010. She says about 50 thousand kids are uninsured today. Brown says the panel wants to provide more health coverage to two other groups, young adults ages 19-30, and medium income people who cant get health insurance through the employers:

“And that will end up probably being some kind of a partnership where the employer and employee contribute and the state helps subsidize a premium so that small businesses can also offer coverage”

Health care advocates, such as Rebecca Kavoussi, hope lawmakers will also put more money into the state's Basic Health plan. Kavoussi , director of public policy for the Community Health Network of Washington, says lawmakers in 2003 cut the number of low-income residents enrolled in the Plan.

In 2001, voters approved Initiative 773, which raised the cigarette tax to fund anti smoking programs, and was to have funded an expansion of the Basic Health Plan.

But Kavoussi says that's not the way it worked out:

“It was supposed to increase the program from 130 thousand to 175 thousand slots, so we were disappointed when in the midst of a budget crises the legislature cut the program to 100 thousand spots and took the money and used it for programs not related to Basic Health.”

Last session, the legislature provided funding to add 6500 more people to the Basic Health plan. So far 1000 of those have been enrolled, bringing the total back to 101 thousand.

Senator Brown admits the Blue Ribbon panel's proposals wont come cheap, but says such programs can save money in the long run:

“Having less people uninsured will moderate increased costs in health care because you’ll have less people using emergency rooms and less cost shifting of emergency care on everybody else.”

Given its bipartisan makeup, Brown believes the panel’s recommendations will find sympathetic ears on both sides of the aisle when the legislature convenes in January.