

Thursday, May 8, 2008

New Maryland law expands health coverage

by Sean R. Sedam | Staff Writer

[E-mail this article](#) \ [Print this article](#)

Nizar Dowla was not thinking about paying for health insurance when he entered the University of Maryland, College Park.

Now, as a 20-year-old junior considering medical school, Dowla will be able to put off worries of paying for his own insurance for a few more years under a new state law requiring insurers to allow young adults to remain on their parents' health insurance until they are 25.

"To be honest, I wasn't really thinking about this at the beginning of college, but now that I'm a junior entering senior year, you kind of see the light at the end of the tunnel," said Dowla, who is president of the university's Student Health Advisory Committee.

For some, that light is a freight train full of expenses.

Whether they are considering postgraduate study or entering the workforce, students about to leave college have major considerations including tuition, loans and health care costs.

The new law will make things a bit easier, said Dowla, who stands to save \$7,500 over the first three years of medical school by remaining on his father's insurance plan.

"While they're getting situated, this is one less thing that students have to worry about," he said.

Over the past two years, the General Assembly has taken steps to expand health care to the uninsured, from providing subsidies for small business to expanding Medicaid coverage to 100,000 uninsured Marylanders.

Last week, health care advocates held news conferences at Towson University and at College Park highlighting the new law.

Passed in 2007, the Family Coverage Expansion Act began applying to health insurance coverage on Jan. 1, making this semester's students the first wave of college graduates to benefit from the initiative.

"This is the same time that last year if they were graduating from college they would be dumped," said Vincent DeMarco, president of the Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative.

Before the act passed, state law required insurers to cover dependent children through the end of the year in which they turned 19. Dependent children who were disabled or full-time students were able to retain their coverage until they turned 23.

Advocates do not know how many of the estimated 100,000 people between 19 to 23 are uninsured, said DeMarco, adding that a "fair" estimate is that the new law will benefit "tens of thousands."

"It shows a dedication by our lawmakers to make sure young people are healthy, have health care and have access to preventative measures to make sure they stay healthy," said Andrew Friedson, student body president at College Park.

“Losing insurance coverage used to be a dangerous rite of passage for thousands of young people graduating from high school or college,” said Del. Heather R. Mizeur, who sponsored the expansion legislation.

The law will protect young people who often have to choose between relying on their parents to pay for an individual plan or “play Russian roulette” and risk not having health coverage, said Mizeur (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park.

“We’re giving a certain level of economic security for the entire family,” she said. “No family is going to be burdened by a catastrophic health incident.”

The bill also allows employers, not insurers, to decide whether to extend health care benefits to domestic partners.

“If an employer wants to provide domestic partner coverage for a family, they get to now,” Mizeur said.

The law is the first of several passed in the past two years to expand health care.

During last fall’s special session, despite grappling with a \$1.5 billion budget deficit, legislators approved expanding Medicaid to parents of children enrolled in the Maryland Children’s Health Program and uninsured adults with incomes at 116 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, or \$11,844 a year.

This year, the General Assembly passed legislation to expand children’s dental care and to help senior citizens who fall into Medicare’s “doughnut hole” where they are forced to pay the full cost of prescription drugs.

“Across age, economic and geographic — any kind of demographic in Maryland — health care has been improved under the O’Malley administration,” DeMarco said.

Advocates are closely monitoring a showdown between the Bush administration and several states, including Maryland, over Medicaid funding.

The administration is proposing new rules that would reduce what it sees as \$13 billion in fraudulent or unnecessary expenditures. Maryland officials say the changes will take tens of millions of dollars from a pregnancy program, rehabilitation and outpatient care and other programs.

“The Bush administration’s proposed Medicaid regulations would be disastrous,” DeMarco said. “It would be terrible for kids on Medicaid and terrible for all of us by putting more people in hospitals for our care. We commend Congress for doing everything it can to overturn these draconian measures.”

In the meantime, advocates are trying to ensure that everyone who can be covered is.

“The next step right now is to make sure everybody who’s eligible for these new programs is enrolled,” DeMarco said.

Another bill sponsored by Mizeur that passed the General Assembly this year requires the state to send application packets to low-income taxpayers whose dependents are eligible for the Maryland Medical Assistance Program or the Maryland Children’s Health Program.

“All of that being said, we’ve got a lot of implementation going on right now,” Mizeur said.

“Eventually we will be talking about expanding health care more, but we’re not talking about that right now,” DeMarco said.

For now, the talking is being left to participants in a series of 13 town hall meetings that the Maryland Citizens’ Health Initiative and Progressive Maryland are holding around the state. Participants are being given information about new health care programs and laws and are being asked for input on ways to expand coverage that will be pushed during the next year’s General Assembly.

Amid tough economic times, the state should continue to look at forging public-private partnerships through nonprofit insurers, Mizeur said.

The state, facing a continued budget deficit and an economic downturn, needs to get its finances in order before looking to spend more on health coverage, said House Minority Leader Anthony J. O’Donnell.

“In my opinion, we cannot continue to spend taxpayer dollars that we don’t have,” said O’Donnell (R-Dist. 29C) of Lusby. “Unless we want to throw in the towel and move to a socialized system, I think it’s a bad idea.”