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## Health care squeeze forcing some kids out

### Gov. plans to push cuts to Medicaid providers

By Molly Parker

mparker2@jackson.gannett.com

Parents across Mississippi say they are frustrated with state Medicaid officials as programs are downsized and benefits canceled.

"People are really being turned down right and left right now and it's frightening," said Eric Weber, an assistant professor in the Public Policy Leadership Department at the University of Mississippi and the parent of a disabled child. "People who were getting covered last year are not getting covered this year."

Gov. Haley Barbour's tough financial stand toward Medicaid

speaks volumes about the legacy he may leave when his term expires in January 2012.

The Republican governor, who said recently he is eyeing a run for president, promises to pass on the state in better financial shape than when he came into office in 2004.

But his critics say the squeeze on government programs such as Medicaid has come at the expense of the working poor, the disabled and the sick.

Barbour plans to push substantial Medicaid provider rate cuts in the upcoming legislative session.

But in recent months, the Division of Medicaid, which is under

Barbour's purview, has drawn sharp criticism for administrative actions that have pinched the federal-state medical program for the poor and disabled, most of them children.

Children with mental health issues, Down syndrome and other disabilities are examples of Medicaid beneficiaries who have been on the losing end.

Tonya Robertson said her 3-year-old son turned a big corner after enrolling in a Medicaid-funded program for children with emotional disturbances run by Catholic Charities in Natchez.

See CUTS, 4A

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## From 1A

But two weeks ago, state Medicaid officials decided her son was not eligible to participate, Robertson said.

She appealed the decision, and her son was again denied.

"Before he started going, he wouldn't talk very much. He was loud and very hyper, and he didn't listen. Within one week of him being there, he started talking in sentences. He listened better," Robertson said. "I just fear that without that treatment he is going to regress."

This summer, citing an ongoing investigation, Medicaid stopped automatic funding for day treatment services for children under 6.

Medicaid began requiring prior authorization for young children in the programs operated by Catholic Charities and eight community mental health centers.

To date, Medicaid has approved or partially approved 270 children and denied 305.

Other parents echoed similar concerns about Medicaid.

Alma Haley of Edwards is fed up. She said she and her husband adopted two pairs of brothers, in 2003 and 2005, under a Department of Human Services agreement that guaranteed Medicaid coverage for the children.

Haley said she never had any problem with the state making good on that promise until this past year.

Suddenly, she said, Medicaid decided, because her husband has private health insurance through his Walmart job, Blue Cross/Blue Shield should have been the primary payer on her children's medical expenses, as opposed to Medicaid.

Haley said Medicaid is seeking back payment from the insurance company for expenses for the last seven years.

Meanwhile, she said, Blue Cross has refused to pay, and high out-of-pocket costs have chewed into the family's income.

One of the 8-year-old twins suffers from severe cerebral palsy. He weighs just 38

pounds and requires expensive medical equipment, including wheelchairs and leg braces.

The elder child, who is 15, recently went to a psychiatric hospital for behavioral issues, she said.

"I blame it on Medicaid. I blame it on Haley Barbour with his cuts and trying to tighten up on Medicaid and taking these children's benefits from them," Alma Haley said.

Richard Roberson, Medicaid's special assistant to the executive director, said he was not familiar with Haley's case.

"Generally speaking, applicants are supposed to disclose other forms of insurance when they apply for Medicaid because Medicaid is not supposed to be the primary payer," he said. "If this information isn't disclosed and Medicaid pays first, that's a problem."

Medicaid's ability to respond to individual claims is limited by federal privacy laws.

In Mississippi, where one in five residents is Medicaid eligible, the program touches thousands of lives and plays a critical role in the state's health care network. It's also a hefty chunk of the state's budget, threatening to eat into recession-thinned resources.

Barbour promised reform in his 2003 campaign and has been whittling away at the program since he stepped into office.

Today, Medicaid officials point to high marks on federal report cards for keeping people off the rolls who don't belong there.

Barbour's larger Medicaid proposals have required the Legislature's blessing.

But House Public Health and Human Services Committee Chairman Steve Holland accused Barbour of "always pulling administrative rabbits out of the hat" when it comes to Medicaid.

Holland said he would fight the governor's plan to cut provider rates. But legislators' ability to control Medicaid's administrative screw tightening is less certain.

Cyndi Bassie of Greenwood said Medicaid officials informed her last week they are kicking her Down syndrome daughter out of the Disabled Child Living at Home program at month's end.

Four-year-old Carley has received Medicaid benefits since birth.



Holland

"Honestly, and I hate to say this, but I think they're looking at these individuals they're spending a lot of money on and they're trying to see how they can cut back," Bassie said.

She is appealing.

At a recent legislative hearing on the program, Medicaid officials said they did not make or change the rules, but acknowledged they were taking a closer look at applicants to ensure beneficiaries are appropriate.

The program is designed as an alternative to inpatient care and the existence of a disability does not alone guarantee coverage, Roberson said then.

Unlike other Medicaid programs, the so-called Katie Beckett program has no income limits.

Bassie's child would not otherwise qualify for Medicaid, but Bassie said officials offered to put her daughter into another, more-restrictive waiver program.

She declined.

"I don't think they understand what it takes to take care of a child with a disability," Bassie said of Medicaid officials.

To comment on this story, call Molly Parker at (601) 961-7075.