

Pilot health insurance plan to enroll 300 more

Wednesday, June 06, 2007

BARRIE BARBER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

As one of seven communities nationwide -- the only one in Michigan -- Saginaw County is moving forward with a pilot plan to help those lacking adequate health insurance.

Theresa M. Sproull, a single mom and college graduate, joined more than 20 people who enrolled Tuesday in the Saginaw Health Plan. The 30-year-old Sproull was left without insurance after she lost her job in January at the Holland Area Arts Council. She and her 10-month-old daughter, Ava, moved in with a relative in Saginaw Township.

Sproull enrolled her daughter for Medicaid health benefits.

"A day without health insurance is kind of scary," said Sproull, who has rheumatoid arthritis and asthma. "Without insurance, I would have racked up enormous bills."

The Healthcare Leadership Council of Washington, D.C., and a coalition of Saginaw County health providers hope to enroll at least 300 more uninsured people before the end of the month.

Approximately 700 people previously enrolled.

The Leadership Council chose Saginaw County for the health insurance initiative because of its mix of urban, rural, minority and elderly populations and a history of social service agencies working collaboratively, said Mike Nowlin, Health Access America-Saginaw County spokesman.

The sign-up effort will travel this month to at least two dozen spots around the county, he said.

Sproull enrolled during a two-hour sign-up at the East Side Soup Kitchen, 940 E. Genesee in Saginaw.

Pilot health insurance plan to enroll 300 more

Page 2 of 2

The Saginaw Health Plan offers a number of options, with various funding provisions involving federal, state, local and private sources.

Saginaw County has 25,000 to 40,000 uninsured residents, 80 percent of whom are in poor working families, said Natasha Coulouris, public health officer for the County Department of Public Health.

"We're talking about hard-working men and women who have to choose between health insurance and buying dinner," she said. "We should not have to make those decisions."

Janet D. Olszewski, director of the state Department of Community Health, said more than a million people statewide have no insurance.

"The statistics are still very sobering," she said. "We cannot sustain that."

The health insurance initiative in Saginaw could act as a model for other communities, she said.

As more employers slash health benefits, alternatives are springing up. Sixty-eight of Michigan's 83 counties offer a public health insurance plan; health initiatives geared toward children have expanded for services such as dental care and the state has issued the Michigan prescription drug discount card, the MI-Rx Card, to 43,000 people.

Olszewski said Democratic Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has called for a \$1 billion Michigan First Health Care Plan to provide insurance to 550,000 uninsured people. Modeled after a similar plan in Massachusetts, federal, state and private payers would cover the cost.

The federal government has to approve a change in Medicaid rules to fund the initiative, Olszewski said. v

Barrie Barber covers politics and government for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9725.