

MIDLANDS

B

OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2010

OMAHA.COM

NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

Heineman opposes prenatal care proposal

■ He says illegal immigrants shouldn't get tax-funded benefits.

BY PAUL HAMMEL
WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — Gov. Dave Heineman on Thursday announced his opposition to restoring taxpayer-paid prenatal care for low-income, expectant mothers who are in the U.S.

illegally.

The "key issue," the governor said in a statement, is his opposition to granting taxpayer-funded benefits to illegal immigrants.

State money could be saved by denying Medicaid coverage to about 2,800 pregnant women a year — an estimated \$14.5 million over the next three years.

"This is a difficult issue," Heineman's statement said. "And we know that there is disagreement among well-meaning people."

The opposition by the governor, who is seeking re-election this year, puts him at odds with every major health care and pro-life group in the state, as well as former U.S. Rep. John Cavanaugh, State Auditor Mike Foley and Heineman's former chief medical officer, Dr. Richard Raymond.

All testified Thursday that restoring prenatal care would prevent birth defects and premature births, and save the state millions in later health care expenses.

Such coverage is warranted, supporters argued, because the unborn children — regardless of their mother's immigration status — automatically become American citizens upon birth.

"Why would we not want that child to be healthy?" asked State Sen. Kathy Campbell of Lincoln, sponsor of the prenatal bill.

Those testifying in support of her bill said the lack of prenatal care can double or triple the rate of pre-

PAGE 4B

Legislators hear emotional testimony at a hearing for a bill that would restrict abortions in Nebraska.

More legislative coverage.

See Prenatal: Page 2

Prenatal: Divisions sharp during packed hearing

Continued from Page 1

mature deliveries and increase taxpayer-supported health care costs by five- to seven-fold.

"The Nebraska taxpayer will be the loser in the end, along with the mother and the child," said Raymond, who now lives in Colorado.

"It is outrageous that some will oppose this just to make a cheap political statement about illegal immigration," said Dr. Kristine McVea, medical director of One World Community Health Centers, which runs health care clinics in Omaha, Lincoln, Norfolk, Columbus and Gering for low-income families.

Heineman did not testify during a packed public hearing on the bill before the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee. Kerry Winterer, chief executive of the Health and Human Services Department, read the governor's statement.

Winterer, in comments to reporters later, said the decision was based more on policy than money.

"I don't think we're contesting the value of prenatal services. That's really not the issue," he said. "It's who should be paying for that."

In comments outside the hear-

ing room, Allen Black of Bellevue, a member of the Nebraska Advocacy Group, a group whose focus is opposition to illegal immigration, said that private charities, pro-immigration advocates, families or possibly even the Mexican government should be paying the bill.

"Try sending pregnant Americans to Mexico and see what happens," Black said.

The issue reared its head last month, after it was revealed that federal Medicaid officials had informed Nebraska that it could not continue offering prenatal services to about 6,000 pregnant, low-income women in the ways it had for more than two decades.

The officials, however, suggested that the state could continue offering the services if it was done through the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) rather than Medicaid.

Fourteen states have such CHIP coverage for unborn children, though Tennessee's program does not cover illegal immigrants.

Campbell introduced Legislative Bill 1110 to establish a CHIP program in Nebraska. It would provide coverage to the children of illegal immigrants because they will become U.S. citizens.

A fiscal analysis of LB 1110 indicated that the state would spend about \$4 million less over the next three years in a CHIP program than in the current Medicaid program. That's because the state's matching expenses in CHIP are lower.

Although health care and pro-life advocates said that providing such coverage — even for the unborn children of illegal immigrants — was the morally, medically and fiscally responsible thing to do, some questioned why all states didn't offer such coverage.

If there are so many benefits to prenatal care, Louisville Sen. Dave Pankonin asked, why are there 35 states that don't offer that coverage? And why don't any neighboring states?

"My answer is, we're getting it right," said Jennifer Carter of the Applesseed Center, an advocacy organization for the poor.

Cavanaugh, executive director of the Omaha-based school improvement effort Building Bright Futures, said dropping prenatal care for poor women was probably the most "destructive" public policy step for the goals of that program, which seeks to raise the achievement level of students living in pov-

erty.

"This comes at a time when Nebraska is showing leadership in early childhood care and development," he said.

Winterer told the committee that HHS had reviewed cases of 6,321 pregnant women who were going to lose prenatal services as of March 1, and 4,655 had been determined as eligible to resume that care. More information is being sought in 115 cases.

An additional 709 legal residents were found to be ineligible for government-funded services, primarily because their incomes were too high, he said.

That left 842 pregnant women here illegally right now who would lose their services March 1, Winterer said.

After the hearing, the committee took no action.

LB 1110 includes an emergency clause, which means passage would require the votes of 33 of 49 state senators. Thirty votes would be needed to override a Heineman veto of the bill.

Campbell, who made LB 1110 her priority bill, said she remains undaunted, despite the governor's opposition.

"I never underestimated how tough it would be," she said.

Contact the writer:
402-473-9584, paul.hammel@owh.com