

January 1, 2005 Saturday

WORK IT OUT MAKE MEDICAID LEANER, BETTER

Like other states, Florida has lost control over its spending on Medicaid. The army of enrollees keeps growing, along with the number and cost of medical services. The Medicaid budget grows annually at a double-digit rate.

State officials have to slow down that train without injuring the vulnerable riders: the poor and disabled. Medicaid insures a quarter of the state's children and two-thirds of its nursing-home patients.

Repairs on Medicaid are tricky because the program is run jointly by the federal government and the states. That means Florida has to ask for permission to make even the most obvious, common-sense changes.

Medicaid fixes are tricky in another way: They could affect the private market in health insurance. If Medicaid dropped coverage for some of its existing beneficiaries, the percentage of Floridians under 65 who lack insurance -- already one in five -- would rise still further.

But tricky doesn't mean impossible. It's important for a slowdown in the escalating costs to begin this year, or else Medicaid will drain funds from other worthwhile programs principally education.

Florida legislators will be asked to remodel Medicaid so that it resembles a private insurance program, with premiums, co-payments and patients making more decisions. Lawmakers' challenge is to make the program leaner but better.

Any mistakes will come back to bite communities, because uninsured people end up in local emergency rooms. So it will be necessary for counties to step up the development of community clinics as a cost-effective and culturally sensitive safety net for the uninsured. In developing the clinics, counties can follow the trail-blazing initiative of Orange County, which has established a network of clinics.

Meanwhile, the Legislature can do a great deal to reduce the burden on counties by:

- Reviving the state's health-insurance risk pool for people who have chronic illnesses that render them uninsurable. No sane system insures people only until they get sick.
- Providing long-term funding for the state's trauma centers by increasing the fee on motorists who run red lights. The trauma network's gaps and areas of duplication also need attention.
- Reduce trauma costs to taxpayers by requiring motorcycle owners to buy personal-injury protection, as car owners do. Also, require bikers to show proof of liability coverage when stopped by police or registering their vehicle, as car owners must.
- Restoring funding to Central Florida for short-term treatment beds in the community for mentally ill people who are going through a crisis. Per-person monthly funding here is far below the state average.