

# California considers health coverage for immigrant kids

June 2 2015, by Judy Lin

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The California Senate on Tuesday approved legislation that would make the state the first in the nation to extend health coverage to children who are in the country illegally and seek federal authorization to sell private insurance to immigrants without documentation.

Senators approved a bill that would allow between 195,000 and 240,000 children under 19 from low-income families to qualify for state-funded Medi-Cal, regardless of their legal status. It also would seek a federal waiver for California to sell unsubsidized private health insurance through the state's health exchange, known as Covered California.

If passed and signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, limited enrollment for low-income immigrant adults 19 and older into Medi-Cal would be allowed depending on how much funding lawmakers approve in next year's budget.

SB4 advanced to the Assembly on a bipartisan vote, 28-11.

Sen. Ricardo Lara, a Democrat from Bell Gardens, hailed his bill as a historic move to expand access to health care on behalf of millions of immigrant workers who toil in the fields, clean hotel rooms and provide child care.

"Ensuring that every child in California grows up healthy with an opportunity to thrive and succeed is simply the right thing to do," Lara said in presenting his bill. "It is what we are about in California."

Some Republicans warned that it won't help immigrants access doctors because of the shortage of providers who accept Medi-Cal, California's version of Medicaid. GOP Sen. Janet Nguyen from Garden Grove abstained from the vote, saying that the proposal amounted to an empty promise.

"Make sure that we don't promise someone a car if there's no engine in it," Nguyen said.

California Democrats, immigration groups and health care advocates have been galvanized by President Barack Obama's executive order to spare some immigrants from deportation due in response to a lack of comprehensive immigration reform.

The president's action excludes immigrants who came to the country illegally from qualifying for federal health benefits. But California has its own policy of providing health coverage with state money to low-income immigrants under Medi-Cal.

A legislative analysis before additional amendments were made had estimated the cost to expand Medi-Cal to immigrant children regardless of their legal status would depend on the outcome of a legal challenge to Obama's executive order.

It would cost up to \$135 million a year without the president's executive action and up to \$83 million a year with the president's action based on protection for 900,000 of the state's 2.5 million immigrants without documentation.

Lara's office said Tuesday that an updated cost estimate was not immediately available.

Brown, a Democrat, has been reluctant to increase spending in his fourth

and final term and has not said whether he would sign the bill. Supporters initially proposed expanding health coverage to all immigrants regardless of their legal status but narrowed the scope of their proposal in recent weeks, hoping to entice the governor's support.

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