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Crist Proposes Outreach Health Program For Poor Uninsured

TALLAHASSEE, FL (AP) -- Health or social workers would visit some of the state's poorest neighborhoods looking for uninsured people to help them get medical attention or get enrolled in government health care programs under a plan proposed Thursday by Gov. Charlie Crist.



The \$64 million pilot proposal, folded into Crist's recommended budget for the coming year, would be aimed at neighborhoods in 14 counties with a high number of uninsured and where officials say the use of hospital emergency rooms for primary health care is particularly high.

The program, modeled on a local initiative already under way in Broward County, would send health care workers door-to-door in the targeted neighborhoods to identify people who don't have health coverage, especially those with medical needs.

Residents would be screened for possible enrollment in existing government health care programs such as Medicaid, or the KidCare subsidized health insurance program for children. In addition, they could be given a health screening and then directed to county health departments or local health clinics that treat the uninsured, under the plan.

The 3-year pilot project is seen as a way to reduce the number of uninsured people seeking primary health care -- such as basic treatment for a cold or a child's ear ache -- at hospital emergency rooms, which overworks the hospitals, and costs more than treatment, by primary care doctors.

The most recent studies show Florida with about 3.6 million residents, or 1-in-5 Floridians, without health insurance, ranking the state third in the nation in most uninsured behind California and Texas.

In some cases, the program Crist proposed may provide mobile primary care, sending nurses to the neighborhoods to help do routine treatments for some people, officials in the governor's office said. The proposal could avoid 680,000 hospital visits by people who could get care elsewhere, according to information released by the governor's office.

Officials in the program wouldn't check the citizenship status of potential patients, officials in the governor's office said.

The plan would still need approval from the Legislature.

Neighborhoods in the program would be in: Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Gadsden, Duval, Alachua, Orange, Osceola, Hillsborough, Sarasota, Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. Only certain areas in each of those counties would be in the program.

Also on Thursday, Crist proposed spending \$60 million to pay for 46,000 additional children in the KidCare program, which provides low-cost health insurance for children whose families don't qualify for Medicaid, but still can't afford private health coverage. The increased money would allow for total enrollment of more than 311,000 children.

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