



## *Health Coverage Protects Kinds in Many Ways*

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As the full dimensions of the economic crisis unfold, one of the biggest issues for families is the potential loss of health care coverage. It is one thing to lose a job, but to also lose access to basic services for one's family and children can be truly devastating. Fortunately, we're taking steps at the national and state level to help, but the challenge is formidable.

The newest edition of Maine KIDS COUNT, released in March at the State House, has some good news about where we have been recently in providing coverage.

The number of children who lack health insurance in Maine is just 6 percent, half the national average, and is among the best in New England.

That's a real achievement since many of the small businesses that our state has in abundance struggle to cover their employees. Escalating costs have made it far more difficult to provide comprehensive coverage, and it's clear that changes in the health care system are needed.

But in this area, Maine has a good record. Over 138,000 Maine kids are covered through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, and thousands more can be added through the recent expansion signed into law by President Barack Obama.

Maine has long emphasized prevention and immediate access to health care providers when a child is sick.

These policies produce significant benefits over time, and they provide an immediate lifeline for parents who would not otherwise have anywhere to turn. We know that better access to health care is one of the best and most cost-effective ways to improve the lives of children.

There are areas where we need to improve. The rate of immunization of young children has fallen in recent years, and now stands at 73 percent - below the national average of 77 percent. At one time, Maine had the best immunization rates in the country, in large part because the federal government provided funding sufficient to cover every child whose family needed financial assistance.

Since then, the number and costs of recommended vaccines have increased, but funding has not. As a state with lower than average incomes, Maine is disproportionately affected.

The KIDS COUNT report, among other sources, has already been instrumental in focusing policymakers' attention on immunization. Gov. Baldacci has included funding for this purpose in his budget proposal, even as many programs face reductions.

What KIDS COUNT shows is that there are definite links between the decisions we make in Augusta and Washington and the results for kids we can document over the years. By using these numbers to help chart our course, we can make the resources we do have more effective in helping children.

Providing health care for children is not only a compassionate response to obvious needs, but a good investment. Preventing childhood diseases - which can have a profound impact throughout life - not only prevents needless suffering, but ensures that these children will be more productive throughout their lives.

We hope the day will come when every single child in Maine has access to affordable, quality health care. This is something we can achieve, and we should strive to accomplish - for our kids, and for ourselves.

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