

# HEALTH

## Feds Support Kitzhaber Health Plan

Initiative to invest in preventive care

(AP) — The Obama administration is buying into an ambitious health care initiative in Oregon, announcing Thursday it has tentatively agreed to chip in \$1.9 billion over five years to help get the program off the ground.

Oregon hopes to prove that states can save billions on Medicaid without sacrificing the quality of health care. Gov. John Kitzhaber's plan would invest in preventive care to keep patients healthy so they don't need expensive hospitalizations.

"If this works, I think other states are going to be looking at this as a way to manage that patient population," said Kitzhaber, a Democrat and former emergency room physician who has worked for decades on reforming the health care system.

The federal government could save \$1.5 trillion over the next 10 years if all 50 states adopted Oregon's approach, the governor has said.

Medicaid, which provides health coverage for low-income Americans, is jointly funded by the state and federal govern-



Family nurse practitioner Terrance James examines Kamiyan Cooper, 1, as his mother Kesha Wilson looks on, at the Multnomah County's Mid County Health Center. The Obama administration is buying into Oregon's ambitious health care initiative, tentatively agreeing to chip in \$1.9 billion over five years to help get the program off the ground. (AP photo)

ments. Federal officials have not yet agreed to grant Oregon a waiver from standard Medicaid regulations, which is needed for the program to be implemented and the money to be spent.

The financial commitment from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, while still not final, is a clear public endorsement of the concept and an indication that the administration believes the initia-

tive holds promise to save money. The state anticipates savings of \$11 billion to state and federal budgets over the next decade by reducing duplicated treatments and avoidable hospitalizations.

Finding ways to slow the growth in health care costs is a critical challenge as baby boomers age and President Barack Obama's health care overhaul extends coverage to millions more Americans, many of

whom will join Medicaid in 2014. Under Obama's Affordable Care Act, the federal government will pay most of the costs for the new patients.

The Oregon plan would create "coordinated care organizations" to manage all mental, physical and dental care for 600,000 low-income patients on the Oregon Health Plan, the state's Medicaid program. It would focus particularly on the sickest patients with the

highest costs, especially people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and asthma or with mental health concerns.

The care organizations would have to work within fixed budgets, with broad leeway to spend the way they think is best. The ones that are most successful at lowering costs would see the largest profits.

The model makes it possible to pay for services that keep people healthy but don't get much funding — such as paying caseworkers to make sure patients go to medical appointments and take their medications. The state Legislature overwhelmingly endorsed the idea this year and last, though some Republicans complained that it would increase the government's role in health care.

The federal money will lessen the impact of payment cuts to providers and help them pay the upfront costs of the new initiative before the savings can kick in. Oregon, facing a budget shortfall, planned to severely cut payments to doctors, hospitals and other care providers beginning this summer.

The changes will initially apply only to Medicaid patients, but Kitzhaber wants to eventually extend it to government workers and the general public.

## Food Drive to Stamp Out Hunger

Letter carries to pick up donations

The community is invited to help stamp out hunger by simply placing a bag of nonperishable food donations by your mailbox on the morning of Saturday, May

12, for the National Association of Letter Carriers Food Drive.

The effort is the largest single-day food drive in the world. In Oregon, more than 4,000 letter carriers in urban and rural areas will join the national effort to pick up food from postal customers.

"On behalf of the Postal Service, I am honored to partner with the National Association of Letter Carriers and all our employees who will participate in this year's annual food drive," said Shawneen

Betha, Portland Postmaster. "The need has never been greater. As part of the community, our letter

carriers see the need and know the impact the economy has had on so many families.

Distribution of emergency food remains at record high levels. In average month, an estimated

260,000 people eat meals from an emergency food box in Oregon and Clark County, Washington. That's equivalent to 14 sold-out Rose Garden Arenas in one month.



Letter carrier Jim Falvey collects food from postal customers on a previous Letter Carriers Food Drive. The annual event returns on Saturday, May 12.

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