

Program to offer free health care to eligible children

By JOSH NEWTON
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A number of Cherokee County children may be eligible for free health insurance through the Oklahoma Caring Program for Children, a service provided by The Oklahoma Caring Foundation Inc., a non-profit organization administered by BlueCross and BlueShield.

OCF Development Director Ivy Lark and Manager Brooke Townsend introduced the program to Cherokee County Health Coalition members Tuesday afternoon, a move Chairwoman Linda Axley praised.

"We have been offered to do something very, very special for Cherokee County," said Axley. "The program has tremendous benefits for kids in our county."

Townsend said the overall goal of the project is to create a "medical home" for children who are underinsured. "The program is free of charge - there are no premiums, and the program covers children in families whose income falls between 185 percent and 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines," said Townsend.

Lark said eligible families are hard to find, but the networking and resources offered by Cherokee County health officials make coordinators confident families can be found.

Children must:

- Reside in Oklahoma.
- Be under age 19.
- Be unmarried and living at home with at least one parent or legal guardian.
- Attend school through grade 12, if school age.
- Be ineligible for any other health insurance program including American Indian health care, Medicaid or other public or private insurance.

"The program covers preventative care, immunizations and well-child visits," said Lark. "It also covers limited outpatient surgery, including removal of tonsils or adenoids, hernia repair and insertion of ear tubes." Other coverage includes doctor office visits when a child is sick; x-ray and laboratory charges for outpatient procedures; and emergency room visits for severe and life-threatening accidents or illnesses with a \$10 co-payment.

"Right now, we have limited prescription coverage," said Lark.

Up to \$100 annually per child for prescriptions can be covered with a \$3 co-pay for generic drugs or an \$8 co-pay for a brand name.

Proper documentation must be submitted, but Lark reiterated the open enrollment for families in Cherokee County. "Tahlequah and Cherokee County can pull together so many facets when we're looking for a way to reach families," said Lark. "This is an ideal place to come [with the program]."

Townsend said health officials in the area can help spread the word, and hopes eligible families will call an enrollment coordinator for more information.

"It may be children who have been on SoonerCare, and Mom and Dad got a little bit of a raise, and the children no longer have insurance," suggested Townsend. "These families are not thinking there are programs out there for them. It is very difficult to find these families."

During the Coalition meeting, Tulsa 2-1-1 Helpline Director Jim Lyall said Cherokee County residents, as of April 1, became part of an expansion of services.

"2-1-1 service was designed to assist the public with access to health and human services," said Lyall. "About 60 percent of the country can dial 2-1-1."

While numerous local phone companies have agreed to participate, said Lyall, some may still not have connected the service. The program offers services in 150 different languages, according to Lyall, and offers referrals to both public and private services.

"We're very proud of our staff, who are all certified," said Lyall.

2-1-1 staff must be attentive and professional, according to Lyall, and be able to tune in to background noise - for instance, babies crying - or signs of abuse.

"The service is online 24 hours, seven days," said Lyall.

Tahlequah Public Schools Safe/Drug-free Schools Coordinator Val Dobbins asked how local the service can be. "If someone calls from this area needing food, would you be able to refer them to one of our local food pantries?" Dobbins asked Lyall.

Lyall said 2-1-1's staff continually updates its lists, including Cherokee County agencies. "We have a full-time staff dedicated to that stuff," said Lyall.

Before 2-1-1 became the "2-1-1" service, Lyall said staff handled about 35,000 calls per year in Tulsa; after becoming 2-1-1, Lyall expects at least 80,000 calls in Tulsa in 2007.

Tracy Norsworthy of Oklahoma Turning Point warned Coalition members that strawberry-flavored methamphetamine has moved into the area, targeting youth.

"We want you to be aware of that, and be watching for it," said Norsworthy.

Another concern, she said, is the introduction of sandals that have a built-in flask, easily concealed and capable of holding alcohol.

"And in this area, with rivers and lakes around, students may be wearing sandals to school," said Norsworthy. Tahlequah High School senior Stephanie Dobbins, part of the American Legacy Foundation, the organization behind the "Truth" tobacco TV campaigns, addressed members and explained her part with the group.

"We [Stephanie and other students across the U.S.] give advice - 'That's cool, that's not,'" said Stephanie.

Stephanie said the people behind the tobacco "Truth" campaign know the facts, but seek input from teens on what will pull in an audience and get the point across.

"They understand the facts about stuff, but they say, 'We don't know what's hip, what's cool,'" said Stephanie. Members applauded Stephanie's work in the ALF and thanked Louise Micolites and Jolie Persons, of the Tobacco Use Prevention Committee, for their work with SWAT - Students Working Against Tobacco.

"We need to thank SWAT," said Val Dobbins. "It's because of SWAT [Stephanie] has such a passion toward tobacco prevention."

Micolites said calls to the tobacco helpline are "way up," and that SWAT students have been delivering certificates of appreciation to businesses for compliance with smoke-free regulations.

Persons said there are about seven SWAT sites in Cherokee County, "and we're adding more and more," she said. Josh Newton can be reached at jnewton@tahlequahdailyreport.com.

Learn more

For more information on the Oklahoma Caring Program for Children, call the Tulsa office of Oklahoma Caring Foundation Inc. at (918) 551-3414. The Cherokee County Health Department also offers a wealth of resources and more information on local programs, and can be reached at (918) 456-8826.

What's next

The next meeting of the Cherokee County Health Coalition will be the Prevention Science Forum and Ninth Annual Meeting on Tuesday, June 12. The location and time will be announced at a later date.