

## Democrats propose new health centers

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Senate Democrats unveiled a proposal Tuesday to spend \$5 million annually to help jump-start new community health centers and provide grants for rural and free clinics, saying the measure would help expand health care access to the uninsured.

The measure was part of a multipronged proposal to expand health care to more low-income people and ensure that mentally ill people have coverage under their private insurance plans.

"Iowans cannot afford a haphazard, reactionary approach to health care," said state Sen. Jack Hatch, a Des Moines Democrat.

Their proposal calls for the state to help start health centers that are eligible for federal assistance but not yet awarded money. Hatch said community health centers reduce Medicaid costs and improve access to health care.

The current centers are paid for with federal money. Three new ones are awaiting federal money, but competition is tight, he said.

Hatch said the measure would ensure the new centers would open while waiting for federal money. In addition, Hatch said the state has 138 rural clinics providing services to towns that wouldn't have health care if not for the federal program. There are 28 free clinics across the state, he said.

The Democrats also called for fully paying for Medicaid in 2006 and requiring insurance companies to cover mental health treatments, including substance abuse and eating disorders, the same as they pay for physical ailments.

"We can improve health care security for thousands of Iowans by cutting costs and expanding access to vital health care services," said state Sen. Amanda Ragan, a Mason City Democrat.

The proposal also would help small businesses get access to insurance options and expand the state's Hawk-I health care program to include uninsured Iowa parents, which lawmakers say would enable more children to receive care.

The proposal would increase Medicaid spending by \$185 million and increase Hawk-I spending by \$25 million, which Democrats say will help the state get an additional \$75 million in federal money.

Requiring mental health parity would cost Iowans about \$1.48 each month on their insurance premiums, said Sen. Daryl Beall, a Democrat from Fort Dodge.

"Iowa is now one of only three states with no requirement that insurance companies provide mental health coverage," he said.

Gov. Tom Vilsack, a Democrat, is calling for a tobacco tax increase to help pay for ballooning Medicaid expenses, but Republican legislative leaders remain skeptical of raising any taxes.

House Speaker Christopher Rants said Monday that Medicaid can be paid for without a tax increase, but that leaves no extra money for new programs in other areas of the state's budget.

"It can be done, but the rest of the budget will be very tight," he said.

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