

Texas Update - May 2006

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<http://votervoice.net/groups/tachc/?registeronly=true>

HHSC Delays Integrated Eligibility System Rollout for One More Month/ State Officials Becoming More Involved in Solving IEE Problems

HHSC Executive Commissioner Albert Hawkins decided early this month to delay rollout of the integrated eligibility system for at least one more month. The agency will be focusing on training for call center staff in both program knowledge and systems. They have also called off eligibility staff reductions for at least the next 12 months, and they have provided retention bonuses to those experienced eligibility staff in hopes they will see the agency through this transition. As before, HHSC will reevaluate the state of the program at the beginning of June to determine whether the rollout makes sense at that time.

In the meantime, State Legislators and community organizations are taking matters into their own hands. In the April Update, we gave news of Representative Sylvester Turner's outreach event in Houston on May 6th. Rep. Turner brought HHSC and Texas Access Alliance (TAA) staff to the event. He also held a Town Hall meeting for families to address their concerns about the CHIP/Medicaid enrollment and renewal process. Below is a quote from Barbara Best, Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund of Texas, writing to a group of CHIP Key Coordinators, about the success of the event:

"The results were phenomenal: With heavy media publicity up front, there must have been 2,000-3,000 people at the event throughout the day. TAA processed over 500 re-enrollments/applications on site. Several other elected officials came, including **State Representative John Davis**, **Representative elect Borris Miles**, and **Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee** from Houston. **State Representative Carlos Uresti** from San Antonio also attended and is interested in setting up a similar event in San Antonio.

I was especially encouraged that Representative John Davis stayed at the event for several hours, talking to families who had difficulty with re-enrollment and listening to the stories shared at the Town Hall meeting. It was very powerful for the elected officials and HHSC staff to see and hear firsthand the problems that families are experiencing."

At the request of State Senator Eliot Shapleigh (D-El Paso), and State Representatives Carlos Uresti (D-San Antonio) and Carter Casteel (R-New Braunfels), Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn has announced that she plans to audit TAA's performance

operating the new eligibility system. Strayhorn is also an independent candidate for Governor.

Still No Word on How Texas Will Implement New Optional and Required Provisions of the Deficit Reduction Act

The federal budget reconciliation bill, also known as the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) and signed into law in February 2006, brought many changes to the Medicaid program. Some of these changes are required, such as a provision that requires states to verify citizenship for all Medicaid beneficiaries beginning July 1, 2006. Other provisions are optional, such as benchmarking programs, cost sharing and premiums, and state financing options such as Health Opportunity Accounts. At a recent stakeholder meeting, Ann-Marie Price of the HHSC Medicaid-CHIP division reported that Texas is exploring all options for Medicaid reform at this point. There has been very little guidance from the federal government on how these new provisions can or should be implemented, and Texas will announce its policy strategies after the federal guidelines are issued.

As NACHC has reported in previous updates, the DRA does include the "Deal Amendment" which ensures the safety of the Prospective Payment System of reimbursement for community health centers. But other changes to the Medicaid program, particularly benchmarking plans around the EPSDT benefit, could be of great concern to health centers depending on the implementation strategy. NACHC and TACHC will be sure to keep you updated as policies become clear. For more information on benchmarking, contact Katie Parker at the TACHC office (512-329-5959) or Dawn McKinney at NACHC (202-296-3410).

Women's Health Waiver and CHIP Perinate Program Updates

HHSC staff continue to work with CMS on these two programs, and progress is coming along about as quickly as a working with CMS can be - that is to say, slow and steady.

The goal of the Women's Health Waiver program is to expand Medicaid eligibility for family planning services to women aged 18 or older living below 185% FPL. Services will include annual family planning exams and screenings, contraception, and referral to primary care. Only primary care services that are billable under family planning procedure codes will be covered by the benefit.

Despite the limits of the benefit, this new program will do much to get women needed family planning services. HHSC is currently working to develop a simplified one-page application for women to be provided in participating family planning clinics and provider offices. They are also beginning to organize an internal workgroup to develop materials and trainings for providers to publicize the program and facilitate enrollment. TACHC is participating in these discussions.

The Waiver program is currently at the Office of Management and Budget for final review. HHSC still hopes for an implementation date of September 1, 2006.

The purpose of the CHIP Perinate Program, submitted to CMS as a State Plan Amendment, is to extend CHIP services to unborn children of non-Medicaid eligible women living below 200% of poverty who are ineligible due to income or immigration status. Benefits and eligible services are limited to prenatal and postpartum care, although the goal is to enroll the unborn child in CHIP (or Medicaid, if applicable) as soon as possible for the greatest prenatal benefit.

Assuming CMS does not submit another list of questions for HHSC to answer, and thus "stop the clock" on their application time period, HHSC expects approval for the program by June 3rd of this year.

As the women's health waiver and the CHIP perinate program are totally new additions to current HHSC eligibility and financing systems, there are naturally system and policy issues that must be addressed for smooth operation of the programs. HHSC is currently working with contractors to get systems in place. TACHC and other stakeholders will be monitoring to ensure that systems operate as smoothly as possible for clients and providers.

Texas Community Health Center Advocates Must be Vocal in Their Support of Community Boards

In recent HOTLINE reports, NACHC reported that floating legislation that could weaken the community board governance requirement for community health centers. Follow the link below to view the current House co-sponsors for HR 5201 by Reps. Michael Bilirakis (R-FL) and Gene Green (D-TX), the Health Center Renewal Act, which preserves the community health center program as it currently stands. If your member is listed, please call to thank him or her for the support! If he or she is not listed, please call and ask for their sponsorship of HR 5201.

The current list of cosponsors can be viewed at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:HR05201:@@P> Members can sign on to the bill by calling Jerry White with Mr. Bilirakis (202-225-5755) or Lantie Ferguson Slenzak (202-225-1688) with Rep. Gene Green to sign-on.

Registry Link for New Advocates

As always, please forward these updates on to friends and colleagues and ask them to follow this link to become a community health center advocate.

<http://votervoice.net/groups/tachc/?registeronly=true>