

Illinois House passes bill to cut \$1.6 billion from Medicaid

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SPRINGFIELD — Four-year-old Celestia “Letty” Young, unable to talk, walk or even sit up on her own because of a rare muscle disorder, knew nothing of Thursday’s votes in the Legislature that could decide whether she stays in the only home she has known or is permanently forced into a hospital against her parents’ wishes.

Those votes came when the Illinois House and Senate sent Gov. Pat Quinn a package of \$1.6 billion in budget-driven Medicaid cuts that its sponsors say are necessary to avert the collapse of Illinois’ burgeoning health-care plan for the poor. “We believe this will save the Medicaid program,” said Julie Hamos, director of the state Healthcare and Family Services department.

Hundreds of thousands of low-income Illinoisans would see their access to health-care services curtailed or ended, and hospitals and nursing homes would be reimbursed less by the state under a plan designed to help close a \$2.7 billion gap Quinn has identified in the state’s Medicaid program.

Included in those cuts is a provision affecting 536 children with “medically fragile” conditions who live at home on ventilators or who require around-the-clock nursing care, like Letty Young. For the first time, their families would be asked to share more in the state’s costs for their children’s highly specialized services, saving the state \$15 million.

Hamos told reporters that families in the agency’s Medically Fragile/Technology Dependent program will have to begin paying \$400 a month co-payments, on average.

But Myra Young, Letty’s mother, said that isn’t something her family can afford and may necessitate moving her daughter, who was born with congenital fiber-type disproportion, permanently from their two-bedroom condo at North and Clark into a hospital under a different Medicaid program that would ultimately wind up being more costly to the state.

“My daughter was in the hospital for her first nine months. She was diagnosed at about 2 months old. She couldn’t breathe on her own. She had no muscle tone. She struggled to keep her eyelids open. She had no movement,” Young said.

“The cost-sharing is not really an option. We can’t afford it,” Young said. “There’s no way for families — my family — to be able to do this. The costs are so exorbitant. How they think that’s the place to make the big cuts is just unbelievable.

“This isn’t the life we expected,” she continued. “I think a lot of people don’t realize this could be them. This is a spontaneous, genetic thing. It could be anyone. People need to get behind us. This could be their loved ones.”

Young’s daughter isn’t the only face of this unprecedented round of Medicaid cuts.

The legislation sponsored by Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) — which went to Quinn after passing the House 94-22, with one voting “present” and the Senate 44-13, with two voting present — also would scrap one of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s signature programs, Illinois Cares Rx, which helps about 180,000 low-income seniors buy medications.

Additionally, the plan would reduce eligibility for another Blagojevich-era health-insurance program for the poor, Family Care, which would affect 26,400 people.

“This is not a bill that goes without pain,” Feigenholtz said.

Hamos’ agency also would be authorized to hire a firm to determine that everyone on Medicaid’s rolls is eligible by weeding out those with out-of-state addresses; those making too much to qualify for Medicaid; those who are deceased, and anyone over 19 in the All Kids program.

Estimates place that total as high as 300,000 people; if that many people wind up being excluded from Medicaid, savings to the state could reach \$350 million.

While the legislation had backing from Republicans and Democrats, it didn’t pass without a litany of complaints from black and Latino lawmakers, who bitterly complained that those in society’s lowest strata would bear the brunt of the cuts, leaving many without life-saving drugs or treatment they need.

“There’s lots of things we can do, ladies and gentleman, without putting elderly and disabled people out on the street without their health care,” said Rep. Mary Flowers (D-Chicago), who urged closing corporate tax loopholes and raising other taxes to lessen the scope of the cuts.

“I’m begging you, please let us do something different,” she said.

One of the money generators that is part of Quinn’s plan is a \$1-a-pack increase in the state’s 98-cent-a-pack cigarette tax, but that plan remained stalled Thursday amid opposition from Republicans.

But in a related health-care vote, the House and Senate did pass legislation that would permit the state to seek a federal waiver to position Cook County to draw higher reimbursements from Washington under the new federal health-care law.

But on the cuts, Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago) condemned Quinn and the sponsors of the Medicaid cuts package for abandoning the poor.

“I think this is a moral disgrace,” said Meeks, pastor of Salem Baptist Church. “We do have a moral obligation to the least of these. That’s how you measure a society. You don’t measure a society on how it treats its wealthy citizens. You measure a society on how it treats its poor.

“When we push that green button,” Meeks continued, referring to the voting switch lawmakers push to cast “yes” votes, “are we pushing people into the grave? That’s the question we really need to seriously ask ourselves.”