

Caring Program For Children Helps Bridge Health Care Gap

BY SUSAN USHER

It's a scenario repeated in households across Brunswick County and North Carolina.

One or both parents work, earning barely enough money to get by but too much to get any kind of government assistance. They can't afford health insurance coverage for their children and their kids aren't getting regular medical attention.

Sometimes it becomes a choice of taking a sick child to the doctor or paying that month's rent or utility bill.

While most children age 6 and younger qualify for some assistance, only about half of the children living at or near poverty are eligible for Medicaid after age 6. Statewide, the program estimates there 226,000 children living in poverty who are not covered by public or private health insurance who may not be getting the routine health care they need.

In North Carolina a non-profit charitable organization formed six years ago to try to plug the gap. The Caring Program for Children gives free health insurance to low-income, uninsured North Carolina children—the children of the working poor.

North Carolina is one of 16 states and four urban areas with a Caring Program. The program is sponsored in the state by the N.C. Council of Churches in partnership with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina. Carolina Physicians' Health Plan, state government and individual sponsors.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield is the

insurance carrier.

This year a \$1 million state appropriation coupled with private grants will allow the program to provide health insurance for 2,242 children.

In Brunswick County an estimated 1,500 children qualify for the Caring Program, but only 15 will be enrolled as of December 1, said

Nina Massey, client-relations manager for the Durham-based group.

The program assures needy children access to health services that include preventive care, such as immunizations and well-child visits, doctor office visits when ill, diagnostic tests and surgical procedures that do not require a hospital stay, and emergency medical and accident

care. It does not cover routine vision or dental care.

Primary preventive care is the main focus, and for good reason. According to the Children's Defense Fund, each dollar spent on immunizations saves more than \$10 by reducing childhood illness and death.

The program contracts with "Caring Partners," doctors or clinics that agree to accept as their payment the portion of charges that Blue Cross and Blue Shield will pay. That means there is no cost at all to families when they see a contract physician.

Parents can take children to other doctors, but have to pay the difference between what the insurance company pays and the actual charges.

"When a family calls to enroll a child, what we do is find out the

physician they want to see and send a packet of information inviting them to become a "Caring Partner," said Massey.

Presently there is only one "Caring Partner" provider each in Brunswick and New Hanover counties, Dr. Keith Reschly of Southport and Dr. Melvin Watson of Wilmington. There is no provider in Columbus County.

To be eligible, a child must not be covered by private insurance, or be eligible for Medicaid. He or she must be under age 19, single, enrolled in school if of school age, and living in a family whose income is no greater than 25 percent above federal poverty level. Generally a family of four would qualify if its gross monthly income were no more than \$21,528. Children with existing conditions qualify for coverage.

Local Groups, Individuals Can Help Sponsor Children

To increase the number of families it can serve, the Caring Program for Children accepts contributions for sponsorships.

In Southport, Sacred Heart Catholic Church sponsored seven children this spring after the Rev. Joe Vetter shared information about the program.

Jim and Mary Riese of Boiling Spring Lakes coordinated the effort, with parishioners saving money as their Lenten "rice bowl" project.

"This is something my husband and I were very enthused about," Mrs. Riese said. "It's doing something that stays right here. It helps the children of people who work and still can't afford health care."

Members raised enough money to sponsor 3½ children and the church matched the sum out of its budget. Seven children, none of whom happened to live within the parish boundaries, were referred to the program by the county health and social service agencies.

The cost of sponsoring one child for one year is

\$264, which is fully tax-deductible. The entire sum goes to pay the insurance premium; grants pay the program's operating costs.

Organizations or groups such as churches, civic clubs or schools, and individuals, including employers, who contribute the full amount can choose to sponsor a specific child. Contributions of any size can be used to help sponsor children in specific counties.

A seventh grade class at Mendenhall Middle School in Greensboro last year raised more than \$10,000 for the program, collecting pennies for six months. It has challenged other middle school age students to join a similar statewide project, Caring Makes Cents.

For more information on The Caring Program for Children or Caring Makes Cents, to nominate a child for enrollment, to make a pledge or to request a speaker for a local group, contact The Caring Program for Children, P.O. Box 610, Durham, N.C. 27702 or call 1-800-742-KIDS.

Shalotte Considering Timberland Lease As Part Of Sewer System Expansion Plan

BY DOUG RUTTER

Shalotte Aldermen Paul Wayne Reeves and Wilton Harelson, who have served the community a combined 26 years, got some good news Tuesday night when they attended their final meeting as town officials.

The town's consulting engineer is working on a deal that could provide enough property to more than double the sewer system treatment capacity without costing the taxpayers a fortune.

Engineer Finley Boney of Raleigh said Federal Paper Board is interested in working out a long-term lease that would allow the town to spray treated wastewater on paper company timberland.

Boney said the arrangement would benefit both parties. Shalotte would get the land it needs to dispose of its treated effluent, and Federal Paper would get free irrigation for its valuable trees.

The engineer said Federal Paper officials told him last week the company is willing to lease about 200 acres near the sewer plant. Between 60 and 65 acres would be suitable for spray irrigation by the town.

Boney also said there's a possibility the town could acquire the use of another 20 to 30 "good acres" of Carnegie Steel property in the same area, northeast of town.

Boney said Federal Paper is interested in a long-term lease, possibly for 75 or 90 years. He said Shalotte could get use of the land for as little as \$1 per year.

"That beats buying it by a whole lot of bucks," said Harelson, who has served 10 years on the board. "That's good news."

Boney said the 60 to 65 acres of usable property would allow the town to add 250,000 to 275,000 gallons per day (gpd) to its treatment capacity. The current capacity is 206,000 gpd.

Boney said he hopes to have a

recommendation for the town board before the end of the year. If the proposal goes through, he said the town would need to add a storage lagoon to help handle the additional capacity.

Amendments Approved

The town board approved three changes to the zoning code Tuesday night, including two that relax restrictions on existing lots and buildings that do not meet minimum standards.

Aldermen voted to delete a section of town code that requires all lots not served by public water or sewer systems to meet minimum lot sizes established by the county health department.

Shalotte has its own minimum lot sizes for properties in the town's one-mile extraterritorial area that are not served by public utilities. Lots must be at least 15,000 square feet in the RA-15 and RAM-15 residential districts and 20,000 square feet in the B-2 commercial district.

Two other code changes approved Tuesday deal with "non-conforming uses," which are existing land or building uses that do not conform with the town's zoning ordinances.

The board extended from 90 days to 180 days the period in which non-conforming uses may be discontinued without having to be brought into compliance.

The rule can be applied in cases where a non-conforming house or business is destroyed by fire. Owners now have 180 days, instead of 90 days, to start rebuilding.

Aldermen also approved a code change that will allow the development of any lot that doesn't meet minimum lot size standards as long as setback requirements are met.

Structures must be set back at least 10 feet from side-yard lot lines, 25 feet from front-yard lines and 20 feet from rear-yard lines.

There were no comments on the

changes during a public hearing held at the start of Tuesday night's meeting.

Merry Christmas

In other matters Tuesday, the town board formally approved \$100 Christmas bonuses for all employees. The money was included in the 1993-94 budget adopted in June.

Besides employees, Reeves said the town should give something to members of the Shalotte Volunteer Fire Department.

"We get more for less out of them than anybody who works for us," Reeves said. "We ought to give them more recognition."

Mayor Sarah Tripp said the town board didn't include bonus money in the budget for firefighters.

"We talked about it last year but didn't do anything about it," Reeves said.

Shalotte will hold its annual Christmas party for officials, employees and volunteers on Tuesday, Dec. 7, at the town maintenance garage. New board members Carson Durham and Bill Allen will be installed at that time.

Form Approved

Developers, residents or property owners who bring proposals before

the Shalotte Planning Board from now on will be required to fill out a special form in advance.

Aldermen approved the form Tuesday at the planning board's request.

"What we're trying to do is get organized so we can do our homework ahead of time," said Durham, chairman of the board. "This is just an in-house type thing to help us do a better job."

Mayor Tripp said information required on the new form will improve the decision-making process.

Aldermen are expected to make several appointments to the planning board next month. The terms of both representatives from the extraterritorial area (ETJ) will expire, and there could be three other vacant seats.

Durham, who will resign from the board when he starts serving as an alderman, said Tuesday he knows a few people who are interested in serving on the planning board.

"People are very interested about what's going on in Shalotte. You've got a good group of people here," he said.

Aldermen also are expected to make appointments to the Shalotte ABC Board at their Dec. 21 meeting.

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