Maine DHHS Announces Nearly $1 Million Investment in Child Health

August 21, 2020

Temporary MaineCare payments aim to boost well child visits, vaccinations, and dental care as children go back to school

AUGUSTA - The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) announced today that it will invest nearly $1 million in existing general funds to increase preventive health care for children enrolled in MaineCare through temporary incentive payments for health providers that offer well child visits, vaccinations, and dental care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with Federal matching payments, Maine will increase support for children's health by an estimated $3.6 million this fall.

Specifically, DHHS will provide additional payments per child per month of $31 for primary care providers and $37 for dental providers in MaineCare (Medicaid) to reach out to families and provide comprehensive services, and to support the increased costs of delivering care during the pandemic, including personal protective equipment, physical distancing practices, and staffing.

"MaineCare's new initiative to connect children with preventive health care this fall, as they head back to school, is invaluable in this time of pandemic," **said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew**. "It will protect children, teachers, school staff, parents, and grandparents as we strive to balance engagement and education of children with public health protections."

Nationwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in in-person primary care and well child visits. As a result, childhood vaccination has significantly declined during the pandemic, with Maine health providers ordering dramatically less vaccine - 47 percent less in April and May 2020 compared to the same months in 2019.

While vaccine orders have begun to rebound, it's important to immunize as many children as possible to protect their health and ensure they're ready to safely attend child care and school and engage in their communities. Additionally, immunization allows providers to rule out preventable illnesses such as whooping cough (pertussis) and the flu when children experience symptoms, many of which are similar to COVID-19.

Dental care for children also declined precipitously in the spring, exacerbating a trend seen nationally that pre-dates COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, only 35% of children covered by MaineCare received preventive dental care.

In addition to the risk of infectious disease, there are additional potential harms associated with missed well-care visits, immunizations, and dental care for children. These include lack of screening for developmental issues, difficulty establishing good oral health habits, missed opportunities for detection and reporting of potential abuse or neglect, and lack of screening for mental health and substance use disorders which are a particular concern since depression and anxiety have likely increased during the pandemic.

DHHS will issue these child health payments as a per member, per month dollar amount for every child who receives a well child visit and vaccine and dental services. Services for children who were under 21 years of age as of March 2020 are included, ensuring that young adults who were unable to receive necessary dental care due to COVID while they still qualified for MaineCare as children can also catch up on care.

The reimbursements will be funded from September to December with existing MaineCare funds, which are available for this use because of lower than expected spending on primary care and dental services by MaineCare members due to COVID-19.

The payments are the latest action DHHS has taken to support access to health care during the pandemic. This summer, MaineCare provided similar incentive payments for behavioral health for children to address the steep decline in access to services with COVID-19 and the closure of schools. In June, DHHS announced (//www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=DHS+Press+Releases&id=2734261&v=dhhs_article_2020) it will use more than $8.5 million in federal funds to improve behavioral health services for children in their homes and communities and another $1 million (//www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=DHS+Press+Releases&id=2679006&v=dhhs_article_2020) in federal funding to help Maine people cope with the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes support for NAMI Maine's Teen Text Support Line (//www.namimaine.org/page/teentextline) . Last month, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention's public health nurses began holding a series of free "catch up" immunization clinics (//www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/press-

release.shtml?id=2978011) for children. DHHS will also include children as part of larger efforts to make sure all Mainers get a flu shot this fall.

DHHS is partnering across State government to improve child health and wellbeing as part of the Administration's broader collaboration through Governor Mills' Children's Cabinet (//www.maine.gov/future/initiatives/childrens-cabinet) . The Cabinet continues its work to ensure that Maine children enter Kindergarten prepared to succeed and that Maine youth enter adulthood healthy, connected to the workforce and/or education.

Credit

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