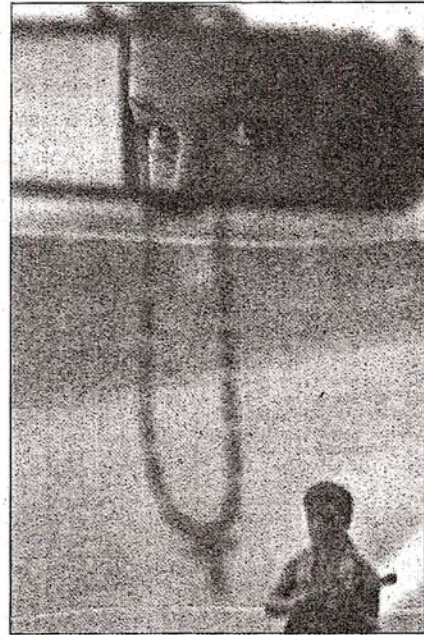


# THE STATE *of* OUR CHILDREN

In every corner of New Mexico – places as small and rural as Crystal and as big and sprawling as Albuquerque – the state's children are in crisis. Reporters and photographers from The Tribune examined the myriad problems that face our youth from ages 1 to 18, looking for the stories behind the statistics that consistently rank New Mexico as one of the worst states in which to raise a child.



# Getting the children insured can be daunting

Applications, fears about government blocks, experts say

By Ollie Reed Jr.

ORED@ABQTRIB.COM / 823-3619

Dr. Robert Greenberg doesn't hesitate when asked what New Mexico's greatest need in children's health care is.

"The greatest need for children, which is the same that exists for adults, is having adequate insurance for health care and adequate distribution and providers — especially providers that take Medicaid," said Greenberg, professor emeritus of pediatric medicine at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine.

No surprise. Twenty-two percent — 127,000 — of New Mexico's children do not have health insurance, including 95,000 who are eligible for the government-funded Medicaid program.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, New Mexico is the fourth-worst state at getting its children insured.

Dr. Susan Root, a physician at UNM Hospital's Pediatrics Department, said another big problem is parents taking their children to the doctor for things the parents themselves could just as well care for at home.

"Parents don't believe they can take care of their children," said Root, 45 and a mother of two.

"They bring their children to the emergency room or urgent care for colds or diarrhea. Most of what we see are things kids don't need a doctor for. My mother would have never taken me to the doctor for a cold.

"I would like to see doctors teach their patients what they can take care of themselves."

As far as health insurance goes, Root said she thinks the administrative hassle involved in getting insurance and then in using it are roadblocks for lots of people.

"I think the insurance morass has been to the detriment of medicine," she said. "It certainly is not increasing the quality of medical care."

Greenberg, 72, a member of the

## By the numbers

➤ New Mexico is the fourth worst state in the nation when it comes to having **health care insurance** for its children.

➤ Twenty-two percent — or 127,000 — of New Mexico's children, ages birth to 17, do not have health insurance. Nationally, 15 percent of children lack health insurance.

➤ It is estimated that 95,000 New Mexico children who are **eligible for Medicaid**, which is government health insurance, are not enrolled in the program and have no health insurance of any kind.

➤ Seventy-three percent of New Mexico's **children have been immunized**, a poor showing when compared with other states. Only five states — Oklahoma (72.9 percent), Arizona (72.4), Texas (72.4), Oregon (72.3) and Idaho (78.4) — fall short of New Mexico when it comes to getting their children immunized. Vermont (90.5 percent) does the best job.

➤ New Mexico is one of 23 states where **schools bar uninsured children** from taking part in extra-curricular activities.

Sources: Children's Defense Fund; U.S. census; New Mexico Advocates for Children and Families; Kids Count Data Book.

board of the New Mexico Advocates for Children and Families, said there are more than a few reasons why so many New Mexico children do not have health insurance.

One reason, he said, is that people have to reapply for Medicaid every year and some people find the process so daunting that each year the state actually loses 35 percent of those enrolled in the program.

"Even though the (state) Department of Human Services has done a lot of wonderful things to simplify the process, there are still problems," Greenberg said. "There is still this historical relationship between people who are poor and people in the (state's)

Income Eligibility Division. Some people are not nice (to applicants).

"And then people have to wait in long lines and take time off from work to apply, and that's a problem."

Greenberg said certain populations have special problems with the application process.

For example, he said there are children who are legal citizens and are eligible for Medicaid, but their parents are not legal residents and are afraid to come forward and enroll their children, despite Immigration and Naturalization Service guarantees that they will not be penalized.

And then there is the state's American Indian population.

"Traditionally, the Native American population has been served by the Indian Health Service," Greenberg said. "But the IHS has had its budget slashed with the idea that (the money) would be replaced with Medicaid funds."

The problem, he said, is that New Mexico's Indian people are not accustomed to registering for Medicaid and many have not.

Root said she sees holes in the Medicaid system, especially in the areas of dental care for very young children and mental health care for all children.

She said that in mental health care, Medicaid pays only enough for doctors to spend a few minutes reviewing the effectiveness of medicines they have prescribed for their young patients.

"Medicaid doesn't want you to spend the time to do psychotherapy to figure out what's wrong," she said. "So doctors throw a pill at the kid. And if that doesn't work, they try another pill until the child is malleable and not bugging people."

Greenberg said he does not see the benefit of belt-tightening measures suggested by Gov. Gary Johnson, which could eliminate 46,000 children from Medicaid eligibility.

For one thing, Greenberg said, for every New Mexico dollar the state saves by cutting back on Medicaid funding, it will lose three to four matching federal dollars.

"I'm not an economist," Greenberg said, "but I wonder what the impact of that would be on the New Mexico economy."

On top of that, Greenberg said skimping on Medicaid care for children could cost the state more in the long run.

"The provision of health care to children is relatively inexpensive compared with health care to adults and especially seniors," he said.

"If you optimize health care to children, you cut down on (medical) expenses later on in life. Cutting down on health care to children makes no sense at all."

Immunizations, or lack of them, is another children's health care problem in New Mexico — as it is in all states.

Just 73 percent of New Mexico's children have been immunized, the sixth-worst rate in the country.

"Cuba achieves a 97 percent immunization by 2 years of age, but why do we have such difficulty?" Greenberg asked.

He admits it's a complicated question, but he does not believe the cost of vaccine or its availability is a problem.

"It must be the delivery system itself," Greenberg said. "You really have to have an ongoing relationship with a primary care physician, and that does not exist to the degree it needs to in New Mexico. We don't do a good enough job of promoting that."

Greenberg said reasons families don't develop a relationship with a primary care provider might be cultural or economic.

Root agrees. "Poverty makes it hard to get to a doctor at all," she said. "It makes it harder to keep the house clean and eat healthy meals, things that affect a family's health."

Greenberg said some families just don't see the benefit of having regular health care provider. He said they just bring their children to an emergency room when they are sick.

And sometimes, Root points out, even when they're not sick.

"I've had parents bring their kids in before Christmas just to be sure they are not going to be sick during the holidays," she said. "And then they sit them out in the waiting room and expose them to all the germs of the kids who are sick."

Greenberg said another downside to the emergency room approach to children's health care is that emergency room fees are much higher than primary care fees.

"That was the whole reason managed care was set up in the first place," Greenberg said, "to reduce costs."

## Advice for parents

**When should your children get checkups and shots?**

Newborns, sometime in the first 30 days.

At the second, fourth, sixth, ninth and 12th month in the first year. Then at 15, 18 and 24 months.

After that, at ages 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20.

**Warning signs for parents.**

These signs might be indicators of significant developmental problems and are of concern when seen most of the time:

• Poor **head control** after 3 months of age.

• Stiff or rigid **arms and legs**.

• Pushing away or arching **back**.

• Floppy or limp **body posture**.

• Cannot **sit up** without support by 8 months.

• Uses only one side of the **body**, or only the arms, to **crawl**.

• Has difficulty drinking a baby bottle or controlling liquids in the **mouth**.

Also, when physical problems are seen, the following behavioral problems may be additional warning signs:

• Extreme **irritability or crying**.

• Failure to **smile** by 3 months.

• Persistent **gagging or choking** when fed.

• Tongue pushes soft food out of the **mouth** after 6 months of age.

Sources: New Mexico Advocates for Children and Families; Pathways Awareness Foundation, Chicago

## IF YOU NEED HELP

**Covering Kids in New Mexico:** Part of a national health initiative sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the New Mexico Human Services Department. Its mission is to inform families about health insurance programs for children and to help families enroll their children in those programs if they qualify; (505) 244-9505 or, toll free, (888) 290-9533.

**New Mexikids:** This is a low-cost or free health insurance program for children sponsored by the state of New Mexico; toll free, (888) 997-2583.

**Children's Medical Services:** This state agency provides services for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disabling conditions in children throughout New Mexico; Albuquerque North Valley office, 897-5700; Albuquerque South Valley office, 873-7482; Santa Fe County Health Office, 827-3703; toll free, (877) 890-4692.

**Young Children's Health Center:** Provides health care for children and a variety of social services to families, even if the children lack health insurance and the family lacks money; 306 San Pablo St. S.E. in Albuquerque, 827-9242.