

The Wild Bunch: Kids' Health Legislation in the 2017 Session

Published: Thursday, 16 March 2017 09:20

Written by: Questions?



First there was the [“The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”](#) recap of the 2015 Legislative Session. In 2016, we brought you [“The Magnificent Seven.”](#) In keeping with the Western movie-themed recap of kids’ health bills, for 2017 we bring you:

“The Wild Bunch”,

a nod to Sam Peckinpah’s classic: a gritty gang of bills that made it through, and others that were lost in the fight...

Improving access to health coverage and care:

Several bills and appropriation requests were introduced that would expand children’s access to care or coverage including...

Wins for kids’ oral health care access! Senator Christensen (R-Ogden) sponsored SB 51, which would return Medicaid managed care services to a fee for service model. Ultimately, this bill was decided outside of legislation, however, the agreement reached will help more children access a Medicaid pediatric dentist or school-based preventive dental care. To further monitor the issue, Senator Escamilla

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(D-Salt Lake City) sponsored intent language that directs the Department of Health to investigate pediatric dental care access issues kids enrolled in Medicaid may experience (SB 2).

In addition, the Department of Health announced this Legislative Session that they will be moving forward on expanding parents' access to Medicaid, starting in the new fiscal year (July 2017). Initially included in last year's bill, HB 437 (Representative Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville), parents below 60% FPL can now access Medicaid coverage (SB 7). Unfortunately, other coverage priority issues, including 12-month continuous eligibility for children on Medicaid, did not receive a funding appropriation this session. Thank you, Representative Ward for championing this important issue!

Greater focus on early childhood and maternal health:

This session, we saw several bills that expand new mothers' access to care, while also strengthening early childhood services and care. Representative Redd sponsored HB 122 which would expand new moms' access to Medicaid mental health services. Unfortunately, this bill did not advance, but we look forward to robust conversation about maternal health during Interim!

Medicaid funding for expanding family planning Services (HB 57, Representative King, D- Salt Lake City) was another budget item that did not receive funding, despite broad support from the Governor, Representative King, and other legislators. This appropriation would have helped individuals in the coverage gap access family planning services, and be more emotionally and financially-prepared for a newborn. Family planning services can also help women avoid risky pregnancies or other health complications. We will be supporting this important funding item again in the future.

We will also continue to support Family Medical Leave. Representative Pitcher (R-Ogden) sponsored HB 242, which would expand the number of small businesses required to offer unpaid leave to their employees, ensuring that more families could take advantage of the Family Medical Leave Act.

But there were other wins for new moms and babies including much-needed funding support for Early Intervention Services/Baby Watch (Senator Luz Escamilla, D- Salt

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Lake City, SB 2) and SB 135 which will strengthen statewide, evidence-based home visiting programs for low-income mothers by conducting a study and creating a restricted account (Senator Escamilla).

In addition, Senator Ann Millner sponsored SB 100, which directs the Department of Workforce Services to assess and strengthen early childhood services and supports. Both SB 100 and SB 135 will improve services for new moms and babies in the future.

Protecting Families from Burdensome Medical Expenses:

Several of the bills we supported would enhance consumer and family protection. Representative Dunnigan (R-Taylorsville) was a dedicated champion of HB 395 that would help consumers avoid surprise medical bills in an emergency room setting. This bill also included other important protections for consumers to assure that they can access adequate provider networks, without having to travel too far or wait too long to see a provider. It would also strengthen health insurance provider directories to make sure that consumers have access to accurate and up-to-date provider information. While this bill ultimately did not move forward, it sparked greater awareness and conversation about the issue of surprise medical bill that will continue into the interim.

A win for families is HB 278 (Representative Chavez-Houck, D- Salt Lake City), which makes it easier for divorced parents to seek medical care for their children. It requires medical providers to separately bill each parent for their due portion, and prohibits a parent from getting a negative credit report if the other parent has not made his or her portion. The onus is no longer on the parent to track down the full payment or risk a bad credit score. HB 278 will help more kids get the care they need.

Strengthening school-based health care and student mental health:

Finally, we also tracked several bills related to student health and well-being. A big win this session for Utah kids is the repeal of the so-called "No Promo Homo" in SB 196. Previously schools were not allowed to discuss homosexuality in the classroom and curricula. This harmful and discriminatory policy was repealed thanks to the efforts of Senator Stuart Adams (R-Layton), champions at Equality Utah and others,

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creating a more inclusive environment for Utah kids.

Another win for Utah students was Representative Thurston's (R- Provo) bill HB 308 which will strengthen protections for Utah students against disease outbreaks, and standardize vaccination exemption requirements and procedures, creating an online education module for those seeking an exemption.

Overall, lawmakers took several key steps toward addressing bullying, student safety and teen suicide in Utah. Senator Escamilla (D-Salt Lake City) sponsored SB 161, which passed in the eleventh hour. SB 161 strengthens school anti-bullying policies, and gives parents and school staff greater ability to address anti-bullying behavior. Representative Eliason (R-Sandy), who was also the floor sponsor for SB 161, sponsored HB 223 which establishes a suicide prevention education program, including firearm safety curriculum to be made available in schools. HB 223 is another important step toward addressing Utah's youth suicide crisis.

But of course, a few good bills did not make it through despite a strong fight...

Representative King (D- Salt Lake City)'s bill HB 215, supported comprehensive sex education curriculum for Utah students. The bill hearing generated broad public debate; committee members agreed that the conversation around comprehensive sex education should continue next session.

Representative Eliason's bill, HB 390 would have expanded mental health counselors in Utah schools by creating a pilot program. Although not funded, the bill highlights the need for increasing school counselors in Utah schools.

Despite a wild session, there were a bunch of important wins for Utah children, including expanding parents coverage and access to oral health care, strengthening early childhood health and a greater awareness of maternal health. As for the defeated bills and the battles lost, the fight continues.

Thanks to all who worked on these, and many other, important bills that will make a difference in the health of children and families in the Beehive State.

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advocacy experts. And don't forget to [join our listserv](#) to stay informed!

We look forward to the future of Voices for Utah Children and we hope you will be a part of our next 30 years.

Special thanks to American Express for sponsoring our 30th Anniversary Year.

