

KidCare funded 664 'medically necessary' abortions in '09

DENALI KIDCARE: Physicians determine what is "medically necessary."

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The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services says 664 abortions were funded last year through Denali KidCare, the state health care program for low-income children and pregnant women.

Gov. Sean Parnell this month vetoed money to expand Denali KidCare to serve more Alaskans, saying he did it because some of the money pays for abortions.

Parnell said at the time that Denali KidCare funded "hundreds" of abortions. Anchorage Democratic Sen. Bettye Davis had disputed that, saying she'd previously spoken to the state health department and that a "very small number" of abortions are funded through Denali KidCare.

The health department couldn't answer for nearly two weeks exactly how many abortions were actually funded through the program. But a department spokeswoman sent out the figures Thursday showing Denali KidCare had paid for between 636 and 689 abortions every year for the past five years.

Last year's 664 is a substantial portion of the total abortions received by Alaskans. The Bureau of Vital Statistics reports 1,875 abortions in Alaska as a whole last year, although that doesn't count Alaskans who had the procedure performed out of state.

Davis didn't return a phone call Thursday seeking comment. But others were not ready to accept the state's numbers at face value.

"I am waiting for clarification about those numbers, but the bottom line is this -- Denali KidCare only pays for medically necessary abortions," said Hollis French, a Democratic state senator who is running against Parnell for governor. "Standing between a woman and her doctor is irresponsible, particularly when the stance also includes denying 1,200 children access to affordable medical care."

Denali KidCare is required to fund "medically necessary" abortions because of a 2001 Alaska Supreme Court ruling. The court ruled that "if the state undertakes to fund medically necessary services for poor Alaskans, it may not exclude from that program women who medically require abortions."

The state does not define what is "medically necessary," leaving that to the treating physician.

"I've been doing this for thirty-some years, not just abortions but health care. And early on I learned that only a physician can determine medical necessity," Bill Streur, deputy commissioner of the state health department, said earlier this month.

Jim Minnery, president of the anti-abortion group Alaska Family Council, said on Thursday that the

definition of "medically necessary" needs to be tightened.

He questioned how many abortions funded by Denali KidCare are related to the health of the mother, saying doctors are free to determine it's "medically necessary" to have an abortion if the birth would interfere with the mother's work or education.

Clover Simon, vice president of Planned Parenthood of Alaska, which provides abortions, said there was a court order during the 2001 case over state-funded abortions that set out what "medically necessary" is about. She said the term refers to "abortions certified by a physician to prevent the death or disability of the woman, or to ameliorate a condition harmful to the woman's physical or psychological health, as determined by the treating physician performing the abortion services, in his or her professional judgment."

The state health department said \$384,000 out of Denali KidCare's \$217 million budget went to pay for "abortion related services." That's 0.18 percent of the total.

It adds up to about \$580 for each abortion. The state and Planned Parenthood said that figure sounds about right, noting that the reimbursement to physicians through Denali KidCare is less than it would be with private insurance.

There were 55,754 Alaskans enrolled in Denali KidCare last year to receive help from the state with their health care costs, including 7,947 pregnant women.

The \$3 million that Parnell vetoed would have allowed 1,300 more children and 218 more pregnant women on Denali KidCare, according to state estimates.

The money would have expanded eligibility of the program to cover households with income up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, a threshold that's about \$55,150 for a family of four. Proponents of the expansion said most states fund at that level while Alaska is currently at about 175 percent.

Ethan Berkowitz, another Democrat running against Parnell for governor, has said the issue is about health care and not abortion. If the issue for Parnell was really abortion he would have opposed all the Denali KidCare money, Berkowitz said, instead of just saying people can get health services if they are up to 175 percent of the poverty line but not between 175 and 200 percent.

Parnell spokeswoman Sharon Leighow said the governor had nothing to add Thursday to what he said when he vetoed the money. Parnell said he was acting to "make sure we don't expand state government funding of abortions here in Alaska."

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