

THE MONTH'S TOP STORIES

## HHS Funds Will Help Portico Healthnet Expand Health Insurance Coverage for Children

Portico Healthnet, a St. Paul-based nonprofit that helps uninsured people find health insurance options, has been awarded more than \$988,000 to improve coverage for children in the state.

The grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), will launch the Minnesota Coalition for Kids Health Coverage, a partnership of community agencies from around the state that will identify and enroll uninsured children into two Minnesota public insurance programs, Medical Assistance and MinnesotaCare. The funding, awarded over a two-year period, will nearly double the amount currently being spent by those Coalition partners in working with uninsured children and their families, officials say.

"The barriers to enrollment in public health coverage programs faced by uninsured children and their families are formidable," says Portico Healthnet executive director Debra Holmgren. "Most stem from lack of awareness or understanding of the programs, and the complexity of the various application processes. Each partner in the Minnesota Coalition for Kids Health Coverage has unique expertise in surmounting these barriers, and this grant will allow us to coordinate our various efforts, leverage our combined strengths, and develop enhanced solutions that are scalable and replicable."

Portico Healthnet will lead the effort, officials say, but other agencies within the coalition include Duluth-based Generations Health Care Initiatives, Rochester-based Olmsted Community Action Program, and St. Cloud Area Legal Services.

The HHS funding was announced Sept. 30 by Secretary of Health Kathleen Sebelius, who pledged \$40 million in grants to organizations in 41 states and the District of Columbia.

Sebelius noted that millions of children are eligible for government insurance programs but have not taken advantage of them. By funding groups that engage in outreach, enrollment, and retention efforts that use community-based approaches, she said, the grants will help reach communities that historically have had high uninsurance rates.

"[The grants] will help fulfill President Obama's pledge to assure the health and well-being of our nation's children," Sebelius said. "With millions of Americans either out of work or otherwise struggling to make ends meet during this recession, there is an even greater urgency to bring steady, reliable health care to children in these families who may have lost their coverage."

The St. Paul-based Children's Defense Fund-MN recently estimated that 88,000 Minnesota children did not have health insurance in 2008.