

## Thousands of uninsured Collier students turn to school nurses, experts say

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NAPLES — Beyond bandages and fevers, Collier County students often rely on their school nurses for health-care because they don't have medical insurance.

Despite improvements to children's health-care in recent years, there still is a need for parents to become aware of health-care programs available for their children and enroll them.

The League of Women Voters of Collier County hosted a panel discussion Monday with four local experts talking about children's health-care in Collier County. The event came during its general meeting Monday at the Collier Athletic Club.

Those attending were told that an estimated 17 percent, or 4,200 of Collier County public school students, are without health insurance.

Often, the school nurse and hospital emergency rooms are the first medical provider for children who don't have a pediatrician or medical professional, said Elaine Wade, a registered nurse with the NCH Healthcare System and director of Collier County's School Nurse Program.

"Children must be healthy to learn and must learn to be healthy," Wade told a group of about 30 attendees.

The issue for Collier County students is access to care, including the following: \*The school nurse is the only health provider to which some children have access.

\*The school nurse is a resource person to help find care.

\*The school nurse is also a resource to find funding for families to get medications.

In 2007, school nurses made 72,132 student assessments and 25,020 parents were consulted.

Many times, illegal immigrant children are those who lack health-care, according to officials.

League of Women Voters of Collier County member Trudy Weisbery was astonished by how many children weren't getting health-care in Collier County.

Despite all the programs that are offered, the North Naples resident said the county still fell short of meeting the need.

"We live in a county that gives 2 percent to human services and gives a much-higher percentage to beautification of the county," Weisbery said. "I'm just really concerned about our children and not developing healthy habits when they are young."

The Medicaid program for children has improved, Barbara Rumberger, pediatrician and director of Children's Medical Services, told the group.

There are about 2,000 children enrolled in the Children's Medical Services, of which 1,600 have Medicaid, Rumberger said.

And there are more children who are eligible for care.

About 80 percent of the estimated 30 pediatricians in Collier County accept Medicaid.

Rumberger stressed her message to the group.

“Don’t allow that these important services be undercut by budgeting things that are going on,” she said.

The Healthy Kids program, a state insurance program, currently has fewer than 4,000 children enrolled in Collier County, said Nicole Slivanik, director of Contracting and Provider Relations, Community Health Partners.

Slivanik said there was an estimated \$100,000 available for the state.

After the presentation, league President Chris Straton said the panel members provided a lot of good information.

Although health-care for children is improving, Straton said there are budget concerns with the school nurses and what is provided by state and local officials.