



## Bill Seeks Coverage for Undocumented Immigrants in California

by David Gorn

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A bill introduced in the state Senate last week seeks to provide health coverage for more than two million Californians expected to remain uninsured, including undocumented immigrants.

**SB 1005** by Sen. Ricardo Lara (D-Long Beach) would create the California Health Exchange Program For All Californians, basically a state-funded version of the Medicaid system governed by the state's health benefit exchange board.

The Affordable Care Act specifically excludes undocumented immigrants. Lara's bill would allow everyone in California below 138% of federal poverty level to have access to care, regardless of immigration status.

"Immigration status shouldn't bar individuals from health coverage, especially since their taxes contribute to the growth of our economy," Lara said.

The issue goes beyond individuals who are undocumented and extends to their families, said Xavier Morales, executive director of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California, a not-for-profit Latino health advocacy group.

"There are a large number of families in California who will be lacking insurance coverage," Morales said. When one member of a family is undocumented, he said, the whole family likely will go without insurance.

"It's costing the state money," Morales said, "When you have a parent who can't get treated, it limits the productivity of the whole family."

There is no cost figure yet in the bill; it says only that the law would create a continuously running trust fund for financing. Lara said the state spends \$1.4 billion a year on emergency services for undocumented Californians. Much of that money could be saved through better preventive care, he said.

"There obviously is the financial consideration," said Ellen Wu, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. "When we look at expanding state-only Medi-Cal, if you look at the numbers it's not that many people and everyone would benefit for having everyone covered. You want to have these folks healthy and continuing to contribute to our economy."

"It's cheaper to provide access to primary, preventive care than to treat illnesses after they develop," said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access California, which supports Lara's bill.

"By ensuring that Californians have that access, counties can make sure that their residents are healthy and contributing

economically to their communities," Wright said in a written statement.

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