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New U.S. campaign to help insure kids

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As millions of children return to school, health leaders launched an unprecedented national campaign Friday to enroll 5 million uninsured children nationwide -- including 172,000 in Michigan -- in free or low-cost health insurance programs.

Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said the Connecting Kids to Coverage Challenge was timed to coincide with the opening of schools because "no child should be unable to read a book because their vision was not checked" or be unable to participate in school sports because he or she didn't have affordable coverage to pay for a sports physical.

The U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid is giving grants to states to help enroll children in insurance programs.

The Michigan Primary Care Association, a Lansing organization that promotes access to health care, has a new \$930,000 Medicaid grant to boost enrollment in the state's MiChild and Healthy Kids insurance programs. Both serve families earning up to \$44,000 a year and provide medical and dental care for \$10 a month per family, or free, with small co-pays.

The association's Back-to-School Enrollment Campaign provides streamlined enrollment forms and tool kits to schools to help them find children for the programs. It also provides help to families in filling out forms.

Though nearly 90% of Michigan children are enrolled in state-funded insurance programs -- ranking the state in the top 10 nationwide with

the highest rates of coverage for children -- about 172,000 remain uninsured -- and 88% of them are eligible for coverage, the association says.

The association's first efforts will focus on 35 counties with the most uninsured children. Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties rank first through third, respectively, although some smaller counties have higher percentages, the association's data show.

The campaign hopes to increase enrollment in children's insurance programs by targeting families whose children receive free and reduced-cost school lunch programs. Eligibility requirements for the lunch program are similar to those for the two insurance programs, said Phillip Berquist, program manager for the association.

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