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### **Health Experts Highlight Opportunities to Support Healthy Kids**

**Boise, ID:** Doctors and health policy experts convened at the Idaho Capitol today for ‘Checkup on Kids Day,’ an event sponsored by Idaho Kids Covered. The group welcomed lawmakers and the public and discussed the latest information on children’s health coverage and care trends and opportunities in the coming year to support the growth of healthy kids in Idaho.

Idaho’s health system has experienced a rollercoaster of challenges over the past two years. The pandemic caused delays in routine medical check-ups for many children, and the state is experiencing healthcare provider shortages and currently has fewer pediatricians per 100,000 children than any other state.

“In my practice today, it is not uncommon to see a child that has not had a checkup for over two years. We have seen parents who are struggling to do what’s best for their children, but cannot afford insurance premiums. And when these families can’t get their children to checkups, all sorts of diagnoses get missed, ranging from asthma, to mental health problems, to autism,” stated Dr. Noreen Womack, a pediatrician and representative of the Idaho Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics.

Nearly one in five Idaho teens experienced major depression over the last year, and two out of three teens experiencing depression did not receive any mental health services or treatment. Dr. Megan Haughton described the first hand impacts of the pandemic on children. “Since the start of the pandemic, I have witnessed the rates of emergency room visits and hospitalizations increase for depression, aggressive behavior, and suicidal ideation,” said Dr. Haughton. “We are seeing self-harm and diagnoses of depression at younger ages. The trends are alarming.”

Prior to the pandemic, 24,000 Idaho kids lacked health insurance. Then federal COVID-19 emergency protections were put in place to prevent Medicaid participants from being unenrolled. Many of these emergency protections are expected to expire this year, putting tens of thousands of Idaho kids at risk of losing their health coverage.

Idaho Voices for Children Health Policy Associate, Hillarie Hagen, explained, “The expiring Medicaid emergency protections mean that every Idaho child’s eligibility in the program must be manually renewed. If not conducted well, this renewal process could lead to children losing coverage. For example, something as small as a renewal letter getting lost in the mail could result in termination of benefits.” Hagen continued, “Studies show that when kids lose coverage, they’re more likely to have unmet health care needs that can interfere with their

success in school. As we continue to grapple with record-high inflation, interrupting access to care for even short periods could have severe repercussions for families' financial security and long-term health outcomes.”

Ensuring consistent health coverage is the first step in meeting our children's medical and mental health needs. As the state moves forward into this next phase of the pandemic and pandemic recovery, it will take all of health providers, lawmakers, families, and advocates working together to get Idaho children back on track towards the healthy future they deserve.

On Wednesday, Idaho Kids Covered presented a series of recommendations for the state to begin implementing to address children's coverage losses, including:

- 1) Idaho can take advantage of available federal relief dollars for investments into mental and behavioral health care before the funding expires.
- 2) Idaho can extend timelines for Medicaid renewals once the emergency protections expire and allow families more time to respond to requests and submit needed paperwork.
- 3) Idaho can invest in robust outreach and enrollment and strong consumer support in preparation for the end of the Medicaid emergency protections. The state can routinely track and release renewal data and intervene quickly if children begin losing coverage at high rates.
- 4) Idaho lawmakers can advance various policies to reduce the number of uninsured children in the state, such as increasing income eligibility for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to the national average.

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#### **About Idaho Kids Covered**

Idaho Kids Covered is a statewide network of health care advocates and stakeholders working to support affordable access to health coverage and care for all children in Idaho. Idaho Kids Covered is a project of Idaho Voices for Children, visit [idahokidscovered.org](https://idahokidscovered.org) to learn more.