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## Child Advocacy Group Takes Issue With Governor Huckabee's Medicaid Reform Plan

(Little Rock) – Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) took issue with comments made recently by Governor Huckabee concerning reform of the state and federal Medicaid system that provides health care for many of the state's families.

“We don't agree with the Governor's recommendations that states should be given broad discretion in establishing premiums and raising co-pays for the Medicaid program,” said Rich Huddleston, executive director at AACF. “It would undermine the very purpose of the Medicaid program and would impose a major threat to health care for our most vulnerable families with children. Giving states such 'broad discretion' would make it too easy for them to cut back on funding health care for our most vulnerable families and children when state budgets get tight.”

While Governor Huckabee deserves credit for his strong leadership in establishing ARKids First and his efforts to fight obesity, Huddleston strongly disagrees with his comments about premiums and higher co-pays for low-income families.

“There is no conclusive evidence that families using Medicaid, or families using any health care insurance plan for that matter, enjoy or want to pay premiums or high co-pays if given the choice. People pay premiums or higher co-pays when they have to be able to access coverage, not because they enjoy doing so.”

The child advocacy group also questioned the Governor's comments that premiums or higher co-pays would reduce so-called waste in the Medicaid program.

“Most people don't go to a doctor if they aren't sick. Most families are too busy struggling to get by on a daily basis and figuring out how they are going to pay the rent or pay for food. They don't have the time or inclination to invent reasons to see a doctor,” said Rhonda Sanders, director of health policy at AACF.

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The research shows that imposing premiums on an already vulnerable population will only make them less likely to sign up for Medicaid in the first place and reduce their access to critical health care for their children.

Sanders says most pediatricians will tell you that the biggest threat is not unnecessary utilization of Medicaid by medically-fragile families, but the risk of treatable and preventable health problems going untreated and becoming life threatening if left untreated.

The group also questioned the Governor's claim that premiums and higher co-pays would prevent unnecessary use of the emergency room. Arkansas implemented new policies in 1996 that required children on Medicaid to have a medical home and to limit payment for non-emergency services delivered in the ER. There has been a decrease of approximately 60 percent in more expensive non-emergency visits to hospital emergency rooms compared to levels prior to 1996 and virtually no growth since that time. Arkansas has already done what it needs to do on this issue.

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