

Sunday Letters:

WIC and Medicaid: Keeping Illinois' Children Healthy

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Every child needs sound nutrition to grow up healthy, and the earlier we can provide it, the better the chances are for lifelong health. Yet, here in Illinois, [seven](#) infants die out of every 1,000 live births, one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country. Keeping mothers healthy during pregnancy and improving birth outcomes can help reverse these numbers. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, does just that.

WIC is a federally funded program that offers healthy foods, nutrition education and breastfeeding support to low-income women who are nutritionally at-risk during pregnancy, postpartum and when breastfeeding, as well as young children up to age five. Many of these participants are service members and their dependents.

WIC aligns its eligibility with Medicaid, an insurance program that offers comprehensive health services for children in low-income families and to those with complex needs. Linking WIC (a preventive health program) to Medicaid (a health insurance program) just makes sense: WIC helps prevent nutrition related illnesses, developmental problems, and chronic diseases, which would be paid for by Medicaid.

And yet, at a recent congressional hearing, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin suggested that income eligibility levels for WIC participation be capped, thereby delinking it from Medicaid, which would deny untold numbers of pregnant women and young children nutritional assistance and breastfeeding support. Not only would this reduce access to WIC, it would divert limited federal dollars from providing services to pregnant women and children to duplicative paperwork.

According to the USDA, the population Senator Durbin is concerned about represents less than 2% of the total WIC population. Any effort to separate WIC from Medicaid eligibility makes little economic sense and would instead come at the high cost of compromised health and well-being of countless mothers and young children. That's a price we cannot afford to pay.

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