



## Boasso favors Tenn. program on health care

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State Sen. Walter Boasso wants Louisiana to consider copying a program in Tennessee that splits the burden of health insurance coverage among the state, employer and employee.

“The important thing is to do something for small businesses and the working poor,” Boasso, D-Arabi, said Tuesday while unveiling the health-care plank of his governor’s race platform.

The primary election is Oct. 20.

“Cover Tennessee” offers health insurance to employees at a cost of between \$34 and \$99 a month for a premium. The program targets small businesses and the so-called “working poor” — people who hold down a full-time job but who cannot afford insurance.

Tennessee pays for the program through a mix of funding including premium payments, new state revenue growth and federal funds.

In Louisiana, 16 percent of the population lacks government or private health insurance.

Boasso also supports an expansion of the Louisiana Children’s Health Insurance Program, known as LaCHIP, which currently provides free insurance for more than 100,000 children.

One of his opponents in the governor’s race, U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal drew criticism for voting earlier this year against reauthorizing the program.

Jindal, R-Kenner, said the bill included a tax on private insurance and cuts to health care funding for the elderly such as access to wheelchairs.

The issue was expected to come up for another vote late Tuesday in the U.S. House of Representatives.

President George W. Bush is threatening to veto legislation on the children's health care program, saying it federalizes health care.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco wrote to the state's congressional leaders Tuesday asking them to support a compromise bill to prevent the program from expiring next week. She did not address the president's opposition.

"I'm actually an unusual Republican in D.C. in that I do believe in universal coverage. I think everybody should have access to affordable health care," Jindal said.

Like Boasso, Jindal plans to focus on a less costly way of providing preventative care outside an emergency room.

He said he plans to release a chapter on his health care ideas.

Another candidate, Public Service Commissioner Foster Campbell, a Bossier Parish Democrat, sees improving the state's charity hospital system as the way to expand health care access to the working poor.

New Orleans businessman John Georges, who has no state recognized party affiliation, favors increasing the number of jobs that offer health insurance.

David Hood, a health policy analyst for the Public Affairs Research Council, said the Foster administration tried to push a similar proposal to Boasso's idea of borrowing from "Cover Tennessee."

Hood served as secretary of the state Department of Health and Hospitals under Gov. Mike Foster.

The proposal — a restricted benefits package for uninsured adults with the state, employer and employee each paying a third of the cost — died when Foster left office, he said.

Louisiana ranks in the top 15 in the nation for providing coverage for children and 47th for providing coverage to working adults, he said.

"We already know that insurance coverage works," Hood said.

The problem, he said, is the bulk of the state's uncompensated care dollars is locked into the charity hospital system. Changing that, he said, would mostly likely need the federal government's approval.

“I think it would require a federal waiver. You’d have to get special permission from the feds,” he said.

The state has earmarked \$989 million for uninsured care with the federal government picking up 70 percent of the cost.

The majority of the state’s uncompensated care funding is directed to charity hospitals and rural facilities that treat the uninsured. After the hurricanes, the Legislature set up a small reimbursement pool for private hospitals that picked up patients from shuttered public hospitals.

Boasso acknowledged that he would have to work with the federal government to make his plan work.

“I think everything’s doable and workable,” he said.