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## Tobacco tax revenue to aid state health care

Gov. Bill Owens announced a plan Thursday to expand health care coverage for low-income Coloradans, using funds from the state's tobacco tax.

"Expanding the availability and accessibility of health care in Colorado is a key opportunity we can address with the new revenue from the state's increased tobacco tax," Owens said. "We also have a responsibility to consumers and taxpayers to make sure that these expansions are sustainable."

The voter-approved initiative to increase tobacco taxes will raise about \$175 million in new revenue available during the next fiscal year, which starts July 1.

The Owens' plan would use a portion of the \$175 million.

"Experts at two state agencies have been working with key legislators in both parties, health care providers and advocates to develop a common-sense plan," Owens said. "The plan will address unmet needs in current programs, will expand effective disease management programs and will be able to sustain these programs in the future."

The proposal includes:

- Expanding eligibility for Colorado's health insurance program for children from lower-income families, adding 4,000 children to Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+).
- Restoring outreach for CHP+, adding 3,500 children.
- Restoring Medicaid for legal immigrants.
- Removing the Medicaid asset test, increasing availability to the program.
- Increasing funding for the Old Age Pension program, which provides medical care to seniors who don't qualify for Medicaid or Medicare.
- Expanding breast and cervical cancer screenings and treatment, adding 7,600 women to the program.
- Increasing screenings for diabetes, colorectal cancer, blood pressure and cholesterol.

The plan also would address health disparities affecting minority populations, which have higher death rates from heart disease, diabetes and colorectal, breast and cervical cancers than the general population in Colorado. The Owens proposal provides \$3 million to support statewide initiatives proposed by the Health Disparities Advisory Group and the Colorado Department of Health.

An additional \$3 million would be allocated to the Governor's Rural Health Care Initiative to improve access to health care services in rural Colorado.

Owens also proposed setting aside \$45 million in a trust fund to help support program expansions.

"Economics tells us that the higher taxes will reduce smoking, and the programs we invest in will also cause more people to quit," Owens said. "That's why the first year of the higher tobacco tax will likely produce the maximum amount of revenue we could expect in one year. It is important to reserve a portion of the first-year funds to make sure these programs can be maintained in the future."

