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Enrollments in state's health plan questioned ; Bill would require big companies to help pay**Andrew Garber**

Seattle Times Olympia bureau

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OLYMPIA State research indicates hundreds of people working for large companies are enrolled in the state's Basic Health Plan, which provides subsidized insurance to the working poor, at a cost to taxpayers of several million dollars annually.

Unions and some Democratic state lawmakers contend the state is essentially subsidizing companies that have workers enrolled in the program. They're pushing legislation that would force big business to help pay for the state's Basic Health Plan (BHP).

Several companies, including Wal-Mart, Express Personnel Services and Sears, have workers enrolled in BHP, according to the state Health Care Authority. Wal-Mart has the most, with 281 employees on the plan, as of March 2003, the latest information available. Around the Capitol, the legislation has been nicknamed the "Wal-Mart bill."

"The idea that some employers can shift their cost to the state is insane public policy, pathetic in fact. They need to step up to the bar," said Rep. Steve Conway, D-Tacoma, a sponsor of House Bill 2785, which had a hearing before the House Health Care Committee last week.

The Association of Washington Business opposes the legislation, arguing that companies could have employees enrolled in the state program and be unaware of the fact. Plus, the group says, many of the workers on BHP could be employees who have a waiting period before they qualify for a company's health-care program.

Wal-Mart disagrees with arguments that the state is subsidizing the company by providing basic health care to some workers.

The company employs about 14,000 people in the state, and 90 percent have health insurance either through Wal-Mart or some other source such as a spouse or parent, said Dan Fogleman, a Wal-Mart spokesman.

HB 2785 would require companies with 50 or more employees to pay a fee for each employee who works more than 86 hours per month. The fee charged would cover the cost of Basic Health Plan coverage for workers. Employers who already provide health-care coverage for workers could deduct from the fee the amount they currently pay for coverage.

Fees collected by the state could be used to help small companies provide health-care insurance to workers.

State Health Care Authority data shows that more than 1,000 people who work for large companies are enrolled in BHP. On average, it costs the state \$141 per month per person to provide health-care benefits to people enrolled in the program.

BHP premiums range from \$17 to \$244 per month per person, depending on income and which insurance plan is selected. About 100,000 Washington residents are enrolled in the program and another 46,000 are on a waiting list. To qualify for coverage, a family of four can't earn more than \$3,067 a month.

Wal-Mart does not keep track of employees on the state plan, spokesman Fogleman said.

"We offer affordable health-care insurance to our (employees)," he said. "It's available, it's affordable and it's there to help them. If there are a limited number of associates on the state plan, we don't know their specific circumstances."

At Wal-Mart, full-time employees wait three to six months for coverage, and part-time employees have a two-year waiting period. Insurance premiums are as low as \$15.25 per biweekly pay period for single employees and as low as \$66.25 for family coverage, Fogleman said.

Christian Monet, owner of the Express Personnel Services office in Seattle, said there are 24 franchises in Washington. For his part, Monet said he was surprised Express Personnel workers were enrolled in BHP.

The company provides health insurance to employees who work full time for three months. Part-time workers are not eligible. "I can only imagine those are people (on BHP) who declined insurance or aren't eligible for the medical program," he said.

Monet said he would be willing to pay the state a fee to cover BHP for part-time employees because he has very few people who are not working full-time.

Sears spokesman Chris Brathwaite declined comment on the legislation but said the company provides comprehensive health-care coverage to full-time employees. Sears workers on BHP "are probably part-time employees who can get their health care anywhere. We don't dictate where they can get their health care and where they can't," he said.

Rep. Eileen Cody, chairwoman of the House Health Care Committee and prime sponsor of the bill, said she expects the measure to make it out of her committee, but it's not clear how the legislation would fare after that.

"We need to figure out how to get health care to more people. We're seeing a rise in the uninsured," said Cody, D-Seattle. "Most large employers pay for health care, so it's hard for me to believe there's any excuse for those who don't."

Sen. Alex Deccio, R-Yakima, chairman of the Senate Health and Long Term Care Committee, said Cody's bill doesn't stand a chance in the Senate.

In Wal-Mart's case, "they are, for the most part, taking care of their people," Deccio said. "I don't think it's the Legislature's responsibility to micromanage the issue."

Andrew Garber: 360-943-9882 or agarber@seattletimes.com

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