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## Colo. ranked 43rd in Medicaid

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Colorado's Medicaid program for the poor, elderly and disabled is among the worst in the nation, according to a nationwide assessment.

The state-by-state comparison - conducted by the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit advocacy group Public Citizen - looked at eligibility, the scope and quality of care, and provider reimbursement.

Colorado, which ranks 43rd, is the only one in the bottom 10 whose household income isn't well below the 2005 national median.

Colorado's median household income ranks 13th in the nation at \$50,652. The 2005 national median was \$46,242, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"It is less excusable for a state with higher income to short shrift those who most need health care," said Sidney Wolfe, a co-author of the study.

Wolfe said Medicaid should be standardized nationwide to eliminate differences among states.

The findings were no surprise to Colorado state officials and health care advocates.

"We have one of the leanest Medicaid packages in the country," said Tara Trujillo, health initiatives director for the Colorado Children's Campaign.

"I guess what we would say is we have a lot of work to do," said Joan Henneberry, who took over in January as head of the state's department of Health Care Policy and Financing, which runs Medicaid. "All those issues we ranked low on are things we are committed to improving."

For example, she said, her office is meeting with doctors and other providers to talk about ways to improve reimbursements and streamline Medicaid bureaucracy.

Medicaid is funded by the state and federal governments to provide long-term care to the elderly and health care to the poor and disabled.

Nationwide, 55 million people are enrolled in the program at a cost of \$234 billion a year.

Federal regulations give states leeway to craft their own Medicaid programs.

In Colorado, with few exceptions, only children and adults who are disabled are eligible for the program.

"We know we need to turn things around," state Rep. Anne McGihon, a Democrat whose district includes Denver and Arapahoe County.

McGihon said state lawmakers are working on expanding and retooling the program.

One priority is finding a way to increase state payments to doctors treating Medicaid patients, she said.

Doctors and hospitals have complained that state reimbursements for treating Medicaid patients do not cover costs.

The state's attempt to rein in costs by creating a health-maintenance organization system collapsed last year when the sole, remaining independent Medicaid HMO pulled out of the program.

The group, Rocky Mountain HMO, said it was losing too much money to continue.

While reimbursement is an enormous issue, McGihon said, "we don't have the money to completely address it."

Using 2004 and 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation data, Public Citizen ranked the states on how much their Medicaid programs go beyond basic federal requirements.

The nine other states in the assessment's bottom 10 are, in ascending order, 50th-ranked Mississippi, Idaho, Texas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Indiana, South Carolina, Alabama and Missouri. The top-ranked state is Massachusetts.

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### Top Medicaid programs

- Massachusetts

- Nebraska
- Vermont
- Alaska
- Wisconsin
- Rhode Island
- Minnesota
- New York
- Washington
- New Hampshire

**Bottom Medicaid programs**

- Mississippi
- Idaho
- Texas
- Oklahoma
- South Dakota
- Indiana
- South Carolina
- Colorado
- Alabama
- Missouri

*Rankings were based on eligibility, the scope of coverage, the quality of care and reimbursement levels to health-care providers.*

*Source: Public Citizen*