

Newborn screening bill wins approval in House

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More children could be spared from debilitating genetic disorders under new legislation that passed the House on Thursday. Under House Bill 1066, hospitals would begin picking up the tab next year for newborn screening, which the state has paid since 1978.

The charge would be \$40 per baby, said Rep. Judith Manning (R-Marietta), the bill's sponsor. "It has come time that we establish a fee like every other state surrounding us in the Southeast," she said. The measure passed 170-7. It now goes to the Senate.

Children can die or suffer mental retardation and other disabilities from a number of rare genetic disorders. Newborn screening allows public health departments to cast a wide net over every baby born and look for specific diseases known as metabolic disorders.

The tests are done with a drop of blood taken from an infant's heel.

Georgia now screens for 13 disorders. Charging a fee would help pay to expand screening to 29 disorders, the number recommended by the American College of Medical Genetics.

For more than a year, Georgia has had equipment to perform more screening but not the money to process the tests, said Dr. Paul Fernhoff, medical director of the Department of Human Genetics at Emory University School of Medicine. "This bill will bring us to where we should have been five years ago," he said in an interview.

About 55 percent of births in Georgia are covered by Medicaid, the government-funded health insurance.

Some lawmakers objected to adding another cost onto Medicaid's ballooning budget. "I've got serious concerns," said Rep. Steve Davis (R-McDonough).

Currently, 136 children a year in Georgia are diagnosed with treatable disorders found with newborn screening. Hearing problems also are detected.

Another 20 to 25 babies may be spared from lifelong disabilities under expanded screening, Fernhoff estimated.

The state could save \$70 million in special education and other costs, and in lost wages over time through additional screening, said Manning, chair of the House Committee on Children and Youth.

"This is truly an example of prevention," she said, "about an ounce of prevention leading to a pound of cure."