

Low-wage workers' health care costs state millions

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CHICAGO -- Illinois is paying millions of dollars for the medical care of uninsured, low-wage workers, according to a new report from the state Department of Healthcare and Family Services.

The report, released Friday, shows that the health care of low-wage workers cost the state \$335.7 million between August 2005 and March of this year. More than 363,000 workers from 3,270 companies received medical benefits from state programs during that period.

It's the first time the state has tallied the cost associated with businesses that provide no medical coverage to some workers.

The information is likely to be used by unions as they lobby for new laws about health insurance. Business leaders say they have had to reduce benefits or cut health insurance entirely to stay competitive.

The same report shows that hospitals' charity bills for the workers added up to \$77 million over eight months.

"When people are uninsured, everyone pays," said Anne Marie Murphy, the state's Medicaid director.

The companies with the most workers requesting subsidized medical care are Wal-Mart, McDonald's, Burger King, Target, Jewel, Manpower and Kelly Services, according to the report. The State of Illinois, which doesn't offer insurance to in-home health-care workers, also was among the top employers of workers receiving state aid for health care.

"This goes far beyond Wal-Mart or any other service industry provider. It's a much broader problem," said state Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg, an Evanston Democrat who sponsored legislation last year mandating the new report.