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Teen, total births appear to drop in region

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By SARITA CHOUREY

COLUMBIA — The number of women and teen girls who rely on Medicaid when giving birth in Beaufort, Jasper and Hampton counties appears to be declining, but those figures may not reveal the whole picture.

In Beaufort County, the total number of births to Medicaid recipients dropped from 987 in 2009 to 960 in 2010 before dipping to 862 last year. In Jasper County, the total was 267 in 2009 but fell to 194 last year. In Hampton County, there were 172 Medicaid-funded births in 2009 and only 134 in 2011, according to state data.

“At this time, the data is still preliminary, so I would not want you to reach the conclusion that the numbers overall indicate a decline,” said Ana Lòpez-De Fede, a research professor at the University of South Carolina who works with Medicaid agencies.

“However, the numbers of those below the age of 20 are supportive of what we’ve been tracking over several years, and that is a decline in teen birth rates.”

In Beaufort County, for those less than 20 years of age, the trend also points downward. In 2009, that group made up 165 births. Last year, the total declined to 121.

Total births for residents of each of the three counties, including Medicaid-supported and privately-paid deliveries, have declined slightly during the same period. For residents of retiree-favored Beaufort County, total births were 2,211 in 2009 and 2,023 last year, according to figures from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Lòpez-De Fede said that, in counties bordering Georgia and North Carolina, some South Carolina mothers may travel to larger hospitals across state lines if there are no suitable medical facilities in their home counties.

St. Joseph’s/Candler health system in Savannah has had only one or two Medicaid-supported women from South Carolina deliver babies each of the past three years, said public relations manager Scott Larson. A spokesman for Memorial University Medical Center in Savannah could not be reached.

As for the delivery costs for women and teens who rely on Medicaid, the S.C. Department of Health and Human Services estimates it to be \$4,000-\$10,000, depending on the facility and the services that are provided.

Doctors are reimbursed \$1,100 for a vaginal delivery and \$1,000 for performing a Cesarean section, said Melanie Giese, deputy director of medical services at S.C. HHS.

She said the difference in price is intended to discourage Cesarean sections that are not medically necessary. If an expectant mother traveled to another state to deliver her baby, South Carolina’s Medicaid would cover the delivery within 25 miles of the border.

South Carolina is hoping to eliminate all non-medically indicated deliveries before 39 weeks, regardless of the expectant mother’s ability to pay for herself.

Giese said that last October the 43 hospitals in South Carolina that deliver babies signed commitment letters that said they would work toward ending elective, preterm deliveries.

The agency’s Birth Outcomes Initiative is aimed at improving the health of newborns in the Medicaid program by reducing births that have not been preceded by 39 weeks of gestation, since those may cost more and may harm the baby’s health and development.

Giese said some decide to deliver before 39 weeks in order to accommodate various parties’ schedules and other non-medical reasons.

“From the mom’s standpoint it might be, ‘Well, my in-laws are coming down for the holidays and they really want to see the baby. So couldn’t we just go ahead and do this a week ahead?’” she said.

Other times, delivery has been induced so that a father in the armed services may see the baby before being deployed.

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