Breast cancer screenings for poor are voted down

By CARL REDMAN
Capitol news bureau

Louisiana’s effort to get a grant to underwrite cancer screening for women will apparently fall short because of a lack of state funds to help match the grant dollars.

Spearheaded by the state Office of Public Health, the state health community was trying to get a $3.5 million federal grant to begin a breast and cervical cancer screening program for poor women.

Department of Health and Hospitals Undersecretary John Futrell said the state would have to authorize the use of Medicaid funds to pay for mammography screening in order to get the federal grants.

Under current state-approved Medicaid rules, mammography can be used for diagnostic purposes, but not for screening, Futrell said. And, he added, changing the state rules would cost the state money that is not in the budget.

“This would be through the regular Medicaid budget, which is about 75 percent federal funds and 25 percent state general funds,” Futrell said. “We don’t have the 25 percent from the state general fund — which would be $113,498 in state funds that would generate $340,400 for the program.”

DHH officials asked the Legislature to approve the program expansion, but lawmakers turned thumbs down on the request.

Commissioner of Administration Raymond Laborde said he’s not willing to commit the state to further reliance on federal Medicaid funds.

Laborde said that the Departments of Health and Hospitals and of Social Services already face a potential $168 million shortfall in federal payments because state health facilities take care of a disproportionate number of poor people.

Louisiana’s grant application was being supported by the private sector and by the Louisiana Health Care Authority.

Dr. Larry Hebert, assistant secretary of the Office of Public Health, said the idea was to set up a program that would provide screening for breast cancer and cervical cancer for poor women.

Hebert said he hopes the state can come up with the money next year so DHH can reapply for the grant and get a cancer screening program under way.

“This is a very important project because we have a high rate of breast cancer and cervical cancer in Louisiana,” Hebert said.