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Final Edition

**Gov's sickest charge of all; groups push for the $8 mil. for ill kids that Blagojevich has blocked**

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SPRINGFIELD-When Gov. Blagojevich lashed out Friday at the Illinois House for impeaching him, he ripped his legislative critics for having "stood in the way" of helping a wheelchair-bound man and a young adult who'd had an organ transplant.

It was vintage Blagojevich, political theater played out on national TV. But the embattled governor's speech also served to highlight what legislators and others say is his own failure to come through for the state's sickest children.

One of the charges the governor faces involves his stalling $8 million in funding for children's specialty doctors across the state. The reason for the delay, according to prosecutors: to try to squeeze a $50,000 contribution from Patrick Magoon, chief executive officer of Children's Memorial Hospital, which led efforts to get that funding.

Now -- even in the wake of his Dec. 9 arrest -- Blagojevich hasn't lifted the virtual brick he placed on the $8 million prosecutors say his administration dangled in front of Magoon to get him to give to the governor's campaign fund. And the anger the governor is facing for that appears to be growing.

"Those sick children, governor, they're still waiting, and they trusted and needed you, and you abandoned them," said Rep. Susana Mendoza (D-Chicago), who led efforts to raise the amount of money the state puts toward specialty care for low-income children.

Last spring, with Children's Memorial's backing, Mendoza pushed legislation to raise Medicaid reimbursement rates for specialty-care pediatric physicians. She said she and representatives from the Illinois Healthcare and Family Services Department agreed to try to get the money in this year's budget after the agency identified the initiative as "important" to the administration.

"I took that as: 'The governor is making this commitment,' " Mendoza said.

It wasn't until the release of the criminal complaint against Blagojevich that Mendoza found out what had become of the initiative -- that the Blagojevich administration had settled on $8 million for the specialty-care initiative and that it allegedly was designed to fatten the governor's campaign kitty.

Mendoza and groups pushing for the money say it's time for the governor to make good on providing the state money. The doctors who provide specialty care to children in the state's Medicaid program now are reimbursed by the state for about 33 cents of every $1.

"I think he is under an obligation to do something for specialty care for children," said Stephanie Altman, programs and policy director for Health and Disability Advocates, a Chicago group that pushes for health care access for children, the disabled and poor. "To hold up $8 million, $10 million or whatever it is when it's needed right now, I think that's horrible."

A Blagojevich spokesman did not respond to requests for comment.

The $8 million wouldn't all go to Children's Memorial. The money was to have been distributed among hospitals and other providers across the state that provide specialty care for poor kids.

Neither Magoon -- who refused to make the contribution and has not been implicated in any wrongdoing -- nor other Children's Memorial officials would comment on the new push for the $8 million.

In a written statement after Blagojevich's arrest, hospital officials said they were "very disappointed that the $8 million in Illinois funding that the pediatric providers of Illinois believed would enable them to care for Illinois neediest children has been tied to an alleged pay-to-play scheme."

There were 13 allegations in the single article of impeachment the House passed 114-1 Friday. None was as distasteful as the charge Blagojevich "would have pulled back funds for sick children in order to extort the president of a children's hospital," Mendoza said. "Repugnant is too kind a word to describe that action."