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Kansas limited in kids vaccinations

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Only slightly more than half the 105 counties in Kansas have private physicians offering immunizations to children.

That's a key finding from a report released Monday by a group of health experts looking at ways to encourage childhood vaccines.

The group found that in 49 rural counties, no private physicians offer immunizations, which severely limits the options for many families. Vaccine cost is a bigger problem than access in urban areas. Only 51 percent of the state's physicians take part in a federally subsidized vaccine program compared with 81 percent nationwide.

The numbers partly explain why Kansas has trailed other states in raising its immunization rate, said members of Immunize Kansas Kids, a joint effort of the

state and two nonprofit agencies that study health care: the Kansas Health Institute and the Kansas Health Foundation.

In 2004, Kansas ranked 43rd for its immunization rate. It jumped to 12th the next year, only to drop back to 36 in 2006. New rankings should be released next month.

Currently, 79.2 percent of Kansas children receive their required vaccines on time, up 12 percentage points from 2002. But the goal is 90 percent, and getting there has proven difficult.

"It's doable," said Gianfranco Pezzino, associate director of public health systems at the Kansas Health Institute. "Other states have done it. We can do it in Kansas."

Missouri's immunization rate is currently 81 percent.

The researchers found that in Kansas, while government and insurers reimburse the cost of

vaccines, reimbursement rates are low and many physicians simply choose not to offer vaccines.

Also, the report suggests not enough physicians take advantage of a federal program that pays for vaccines for children in low-income families. Finally, the report says, too many parents don't have the time or money to get their children immunized.

The group concluded that the state should do more to lower the cost of vaccines and encourage more doctors to administer them. The report suggests that Kansas look at buying vaccines in bulk to cut costs, and speed up work on a statewide database of vaccination records.

In recent years, Kansas has tried public outreach, surveys of physicians and parents and even contests. Low-income families can register to win \$400 toward their utility bills if their children are immunized on time.