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HEADLINE: BILL WOULD COVER LONGER HOSPITAL STAYS FOR NEW MOTHERS

BODY:

A bill awaiting Gov. Parris Glendening's approval would require insurers to cover 48-hour hospital stays or home care for mothers and newborns, reversing a trend toward shorter postpregnancy care.

Under the measure, mother and child could be discharged before 48 hours if they are medically stable, but a nurse would have to visit them at home.

The bill, among the first such efforts in the nation, would have made a big difference for mothers such as Stacey Berger and Ellen O'Brien.

Mrs. Berger, of Clarkesville in Howard County, had to bring her wailing daughter back to a doctor during a snowstorm to discover the child was malnourished and jaundiced.

And Ms. O'Brien convinced doctors at Greater Baltimore Medical Center to let her take her first child home _ even though he had respiratory problems _ rather than be discharged without him.

"I took him out of here in the middle of the night, in a pouring-down rainstorm," Ms. O'Brien said. "In hindsight, I should have let him stay, but I should have been able to stay with him."

Pregnancy stays have grown shorter as hospitals cope with cost pressures. In 1990, the stay for childbirth was roughly three days. Now it's about one.

The governor's position on the measure remains unclear.

The Maryland Association of Health Maintenance Organizations and other critics of the proposed legislation say 48-hour hospital stays should not be mandated by lawmakers for all of the 75,000 babies born in Maryland annually.

"It's really a slippery slope in terms of legislating medicine," said Kala Ladenheim, a healthcare expert who monitors state policy at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Some hospitals have responded by scheduling home visits or follow-up telephone calls by nurses, for which some insurance companies pay. The state's largest insurer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Maryland, routinely pays for home nurse visits.

Proponents of short stays say the mother and infant bond more quickly at home and aren't exposed as long to hospital germs. Opponents argue that several serious illnesses that strike infants cannot be detected until 24 hours after birth.

In Maryland, from 1978 to 1988, more than 95 percent of cases of one metabolic disorder, phenylketonuria, were picked up by the first screening test. By 1994, because of shorter hospital stays, that number had dropped to 66 percent, said **Dr. Susan Panny**, who heads the Office for Hereditary Disorders in the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.