

Op-Ed: Keep the Kids Healthy

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Keep the Kids Healthy

By STEVE ROTHMAN

CONGRESSMAN SCOTT GARRETT and I have the privilege of representing Bergen County in the U.S. House of Representatives. In that capacity, we often work together on important local issues. However, when it comes to the fate of the bipartisan, successful State Children's Health Insurance Program, we profoundly disagree.

President Bush and his remaining allies in Congress oppose providing health care for 10 million American children. They offer various arguments in their defense.

First, SCHIP opponents say we cannot afford to cover these children. However, for less than the \$125 billion the U.S. government spends per year on the disastrous war in Iraq and the \$41 billion in tax cuts per year for people making more than \$1 million annual income, to cite just a couple examples, it is clear that there is more than \$7 billion a year available to cover all of the American children who are eligible for health insurance under this program.

Unfortunately, the private health insurance market has not found a way to provide 46 million Americans, 1.3 million of them in New Jersey, with affordable health insurance.

Those in Congress who oppose government intervention in the face of our national health insurance crisis leave people to wonder what the priorities for government should be if not to ensure that children have health insurance. Most American families cannot afford \$12,000 for health insurance. Isn't it time we faced the fact that the present system for financing health care for our people has long been broken, is grossly inefficient and wasteful, and that our whole country suffers because of it?

All of us pay the price of inaction. First, we know that emergency room care is more costly than preventive care. Second, when the uninsured go to the ER and cannot pay their medical bills, hospitals shift the costs onto those who can pay — those with health insurance. Third, American businesses, small and large, have long said that the current health care system hurts their ability to compete in the global economy, where most industrialized countries pay their workers' health care costs and remove that burden from businesses.

The bipartisan SCHIP legislation President Bush vetoed was negotiated in good faith. It was supported by 69 of 100 Senators, 43 governors, 72 percent of the American people and a broad range of national organizations.

It was written largely by Democratic Senator Max Baucus and Republican Senator Chuck Grassley, and backed by 12 of the 15 members of New Jersey's congressional delegation – Democrats and Republicans alike.

Some people who oppose SCHIP even go so far as to criticize Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid as examples of what they call failed government programs on which SCHIP builds.

Failed government programs? They came into being precisely because, as in the instance of 46 million Americans without affordable health insurance, the private marketplace failed for decades to solve the problem. Can anyone seriously believe that our nation would be better off without Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid? Or that America's children should not be covered by affordable health insurance?

Opponents of the SCHIP bill have also said that the legislation would have made it easier for illegal aliens to access benefits. This is untrue. The precise language of the bill states that no illegal immigrant shall receive benefits under this bill and goes further to require that states will be penalized unless they take affirmative steps to make sure no people here illegally get benefits.

The Democrats and dozens of Republicans in Congress came close to overriding the President's veto of SCHIP. We will soon send another bill to the president. This legislation to preserve coverage for six million children enrolled in SCHIP and enable states to enroll four million more kids is essential for the well-being of our country.

No Democratic or Republican members of Congress should have allowed Bush's veto to stand.

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U.S. Rep. Steve Rothman has represented New Jersey's 9th Congressional District since 1997 and sits on the House Committee on Appropriations.

