

## Children's health program in limbo

### SCHIP to expire Sept. 30; Congress can't reach agreement

BY RICK NEALE  
FLORIDA TODAY

Lukas Richmond started wheezing again this week.

The boisterous Titusville 8-year-old missed 52 days of school last year because of severe asthma and allergies -- he fell ill with pneumonia four times. Wednesday, his mother, Leigh Richmond, took Lukas back to the Children's Medical Services clinic in Rockledge for another round of respiratory testing.

The result? More expensive drugs for Lukas, though "he's on enough medicine to make a person's head spin," Richmond said.

Like 5,805 other Brevard County children, Lukas relies on Florida KidCare for medical coverage, an initiative funded by the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program

"It's been a lifesaver for Lucas," Leigh said.

But Richmond and others worry the end may be near: SCHIP expires Sept. 30, and Congress has not determined the program's fate.

SCHIP provides health coverage for 225,593 Florida youngsters from low-income households who do not qualify for Medicaid. A study has shown most of the recipients are black or Hispanic, live in poverty and went without any health insurance before signing up for the program.

Supporters fear if Congress doesn't agree to continue the funding, tens of thousands of poor children in Florida alone and millions more across the country will go without regular medical care or flood already busy emergency rooms, driving up health care costs for everyone. Critics argue the tax-funded program has stretched beyond its original aim and is vulnerable to abuse.

Last month, an \$86 billion reauthorization bill providing coverage for 5 million children passed the House by a 225-204 vote, a measure President Bush threatened to veto. The Senate proposed and passed a more modest, \$35 billion version that would cover 1 million fewer children nationwide.

Both of Brevard County's representatives -- Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo, and Dave Weldon, R-Indianapolis -- voted against the House bill.

Feeney said he supports extending SCHIP, but Democrats wanted to expand its breadth into a version of "Hillarycare" and "secret socialized medicine" that could provide tax-funded health care for illegal aliens.

"I did not support some of the changes that turned this into an international socialized medicine program," Feeney said. "When you mix sugar with rotten garbage, you don't improve the garbage. And you ruin the sugar."

Weldon's press secretary, Kurt Heath, said Weldon supports SCHIP.

"The problem with the House bill is it goes way, way, way, way, way beyond that. You have what is essentially a tripling of that program," Heath said.

Feeney said conference-committee politicking to beat the Sept. 30 deadline will begin soon on the Senate version, which passed by a 68-31 margin.

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Orlando, voted "yes" and Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Orlando, voted "no." Messages seeking comment were left for both senators.

Last week, about 50 people attended a pro-SCHIP "Cover All Children" rally at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Melbourne. The event was organized by Congregations for Community Action, a coalition of eight south Brevard churches.

"They said no child would be left behind. There are a lot of kids getting left behind," said Sandra Pelham, who chairs the Melbourne-Palm Bay Powell subdivision neighborhood watch program. Meanwhile, the Rockledge CMS facility serves 453 special-needs KidCare patients, Regional Program Administrator Rob Bridger said, including children with attention-deficit disorder, diabetes and cleft palates.

"Loss of funding will mean less primary care visits, less preventative care visits," said Lukas Richmond's pediatric pulmonologist, Dr. Floyd Livingston. "It'll probably create more emergency room visits and drive up health care costs."

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