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Another View

Rep. Dent should vote 'yes' on SCHIP compromise

By David Brown

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Congress has an opportunity next month to take a dramatic step toward providing access to affordable, quality health care to all children. Here in the Lehigh Valley, more than 8,250 children are uninsured, and many families are struggling with the financial and psychological stress of going without health care insurance. Many of those families are caught in the middle: earning too much to qualify for Medicaid, but too little to afford private insurance.

One key to covering more children is a strong reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which provides federal block grants to the states to support children's health. The SCHIP program was created 10 years ago with broad bipartisan support. It has been a remarkable success: Along with Medicaid, it has helped to reduce the number of uninsured children across the country by one-third in the last decade. The program will expire on Sept. 30 unless reauthorizing legislation is signed into law.

Two weeks ago, both the House and Senate passed bills to renew and expand the SCHIP program, despite threats of a presidential veto. The Senate version passed with strong bipartisan support, while the House bill received very little support from Republicans. Under the House bill, Pennsylvania could receive as much as \$60 million in additional funding for children's health care next year.

Congregations United for Neighborhood Action (CUNA), a federation of faith-based institutions working to improve conditions for families in the Lehigh Valley, supported both the House and Senate versions of the bill. Last spring, CUNA leaders from Allentown and Bethlehem joined 400 others from across the nation in Washington, D.C., to plead for investing in children's health care. Indeed, as informed by our various faith traditions, we believe it's a moral imperative.

Our congressman, Rep. Charlie Dent, joined us at the event and pledged to work with us to find the \$50 billion needed to reach millions of uninsured children. So, we were especially disappointed that when SCHIP came up for renewal in the House earlier this month, Rep. Dent voted against the bill.

Voters, including senior citizens, should understand that the bill that Rep. Dent voted against has received broad support from senior citizen organizations, including AARP. All of the nation's leading health care and children's advocacy organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association and the March of Dimes, are working to see Congress meet a commitment it made in March to budget \$50 billion over five years to strengthen the program.

Gov. Ed Rendell says Pennsylvania needs Congress to allocate full funding of \$50 billion to make it possible for Pennsylvania's CHIP program to reach 250,000 uninsured children. Unfortunately, two powerful special-interest groups have lined up against this. The health insurance industry is pouring money into a misleading lobbying campaign to prevent Congress from reducing overpayments to health insurance companies that participate in Medicare. These overpayments raise premiums for those on Medicare, while providing a windfall to insurance companies -- which is why they are opposed by AARP. Also opposing it is the tobacco lobby. Higher tobacco taxes, which would also fund children's coverage, diminish youth smoking, a goal the tobacco industry says it supports.

CUNA has worked closely with Rep. Dent in the past, and we know he is willing to support what is right for our community. As a Pennsylvania state legislator, Rep. Dent was a strong supporter of children's health care. In September, he will have another opportunity to vote up or down on compromise children's health legislation now being negotiated between the House and the Senate.

Families and faith communities in the Lehigh Valley are counting on Congressman Dent to vote "yes" for a strong reauthorization of the SCHIP program. More than 250,000 children in Pennsylvania are depending on it.

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