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SHOULD THE STATE CHILDREN'S HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM BE EXPANDED?

## **Yes: Let's get on with covering uninsured children**

By **Reginald L. Gary and Jeremy Kaercher**

September 21, 2007

Within two weeks Congress is expected to pass bipartisan legislation to renew the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, before the program expires on Sept. 30. This is welcome news to the parents of 65,127 children covered by Healthy Families in San Diego County, which is funded by SCHIP, and to the parents of 103,000 more children in our county currently uninsured.

The compromise legislation crafted by congressional leaders from both parties would provide health coverage to just 4 million of the 9 million uninsured children in the United States. This modest plan falls short of what voters want – nearly nine in 10 Americans say that Congress should expand SCHIP and Medicaid to reach all uninsured children. Leaving 5 million children without the hope of health coverage misses the moral mark we expect from our elected officials.

Nonetheless, in the world as we find it, the bipartisan compromise in Congress represents a significant step forward for children, including the 763,000 uninsured children in California. It deserves support from Democrats and Republicans. The compromise bill is notable on policy grounds, because it focuses federal help on the lowest-income uninsured children in the nation, and on political grounds, because it is likely to win bipartisan support in Congress.

The problem now is that President Bush has threatened to veto any legislation that covers more uninsured children. As a person of faith, the president should understand that our society has a moral obligation to protect the health of our children. We are judged by how we treat the least among us. Leaving millions of children uninsured is morally unacceptable and financially shortsighted.

The president made a mistake by turning renewal of a successful bipartisan program to improve children's health into an ideological battle over the future of America's health care system. That's why governors from both parties have urged the president to pull back from his veto threat.

SCHIP helps children whose parents cannot obtain affordable family coverage at work. Sadly, with health costs rising, more and more working families find themselves in the same tough position; their employer does not offer health coverage or does at premiums they cannot afford. Nine of 10 of the uninsured children who would be covered under the SCHIP compromise live in low-income families.

The best hope for avoiding a confrontation between Congress and the president on children's health is for House Republicans to join with their colleagues in the Senate in supporting the SCHIP compromise. If members of Congress rally behind SCHIP legislation, the president would have no choice but to back down. Then our state and others could get on with the job of making sure that low-income children have the medical coverage they need to grow up healthy.

Let's pray that compassion and good judgment rule the day in Washington, D.C.

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