

ROLL CALL

Children Deserve Special Status in Health Debate

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By Sen. Jay Rockefeller

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Congress is working day and night to pass a good health care bill - one that works for all Americans. This is not a new story.

But one piece of this story that mysteriously isn't getting the attention it deserves is the story about kids. Children deserve special status, special protections and the full attention of Congress - anything less is a moral failure.

When President Barack Obama signed the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act into law earlier this year, we took a huge step forward to give children the healthy start they need.

The new law eliminated persistent federal funding shortfalls, so that states can keep covering the nearly 7 million kids they cover now, and it provided new federal resources for states to cover at least 4 million additional children. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that 14.1 million children will have health insurance coverage by 2013 as a result of CHIP reauthorization.

But the ink has barely dried on this new law, and, sadly, some in Congress are threatening to repeal the successful Children Health Insurance Program in its entirety.

After such meaningful and hard-fought progress for children, repealing CHIP represents a drastic setback. It is a change that I absolutely will not support.

Some argue that CHIP was always intended to be a temporary program - a stopgap measure hastily enacted after the health reform effort of the 1990s, until comprehensive health reform could be achieved. In reality, CHIP was the result of a focused, bipartisan commitment - which began with the National Commission on Children - to secure our nation's future by providing health insurance to all children. There was nothing short-term about the plan.

In the mid-1990s, there were more than 10 million uninsured children in this country. These children did not have any regular source of medical care. They did not have access to basic preventive care and immunizations. The common cold could turn into bronchitis or pneumonia or the flu. Hospitalizations were likely and emergency rooms their only option.

The late Sen. John Chafee (R-R.I.) and I first introduced the Children's Health Insurance Provides Security - or CHIPS - Act in 1997. Not unlike today's efforts, crafting that legislation was a monumental task. But Democrats and Republicans, with bipartisan leadership also from Sens. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), came together to develop a cost-effective proposal to protect children's health.

In the decade since, millions of children have received the necessary, and sometimes life-saving, health care they need. Together, Medicaid and CHIP have significantly increased children's coverage levels, even as the overall number of uninsured Americans rose.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of uninsured children declined by about 800,000 from 2007 to 2008, reaching its lowest level in more than a decade. More kids can see a doctor when they get sick, receive necessary vaccines and immunizations, and get the preventive screenings they need for a healthy start in life.

The Children's Health Insurance Program is a proven program - a partnership between the federal government and the states that works, and works well. The notion that some would attempt to dismantle CHIP in the name of health care reform is simply unconscionable.

Covering children and adults from the same family in a single health plan could do a lot of good, but family coverage must not come at the expense of affordable kids coverage that we know works. The Congressional Budget Office has been very clear that replacing CHIP with private health coverage in new health insurance exchanges will lead some children to lose their health coverage altogether. Reform should improve the coverage children have today and contain costs - not take critical benefits and cost-sharing protections away.

Imagine how hard it must be for a mother or father to decide to wait just one more day in the hopes that a sick child's frightening symptoms will disappear, only to see them worsen in the middle of the night. Without quality coverage, they're stuck with no way out. It is a harsh reality for too many families.

Policymakers from both parties have consistently told every American that if they like the coverage they have today, they will be able to keep it. But it now seems some would make a tragic exception for vulnerable children. That is just plain wrong, and until we get it right, my fight for children continues. Because the fight for children is and should always be the fight that matters most.

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