



Posted on Sun, Oct. 26, 2008

Vote for Kids' Health

By Lacy McNary,

When Gov. Steve Beshear's plan to increase enrollment in the Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program goes into effect on Nov. 1, it will mark an important step forward in our state's commitment to the well-being of its children.

The governor hopes to provide health insurance to 35,000 additional children by the end of 2010 by simplifying the enrollment process for KCHIP through the elimination of face-to-face interviews and by significantly increasing outreach efforts to ensure that children entitled to health care through the program receive it.

This effort is vital to the health and prosperity of the 93,000 Kentucky children who now lack health insurance. Data consistently show that kids who have health coverage do better in school and are healthier, physically and mentally.

But Beshear can't do it alone. Providing health insurance for all those children takes money — and much of that money comes from the federal government. When the new Congress gets to work in January, the Kentucky delegation must step forward to ensure that the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides matching funds to help states, is given adequate support.

KCHIP has been a remarkable success story, covering more than 52,000 Kentucky children who would otherwise be uninsured, at a cost to Kentucky of just \$440 per child annually, with the remaining \$1,560 covered by the federal government.

In the last seven years, the number of uninsured children in Kentucky has declined by more than 40 percent, even as the number of uninsured adults has climbed. This record is particularly impressive because it has occurred during a period when the number of children insured through their parents' employers has decreased.

Despite strong bipartisan support in Kentucky and around the nation, SCHIP is at risk because the legislation to extend and strengthen the program in 2007 was vetoed.

A short-term extension expires in March, meaning that Congress will need to act quickly.

Before we Kentuckians head for the polls Nov. 4, we should insist that our candidates support the health coverage our state's children need to grow into healthy and productive adults.

Kentucky's congressional candidates must stake their ground now with a public commitment to support a strong SCHIP package that provides the financial partnership Kentucky and other states need to continue to serve the children now insured; that reaches out to children who are eligible but not enrolled; and that expands eligibility to cover near-poor children who also need health care. This would require new funding of at least \$50 billion.

Although Beshear's plan takes important steps to simplify the enrollment process, there is much that can be done at the federal level to further cut red tape.

This includes providing an "express lane" for enrolling kids who qualify for food stamps, school lunch or other programs with income criteria similar to KCHIP's.

This is no time for our nation to cut back on programs that help those most in need. As our economy continues to falter, more families are likely to move further down the economic ladder and lose their health care coverage.

That means more children going without immunizations. It means more kids not getting treatment for problems like asthma and ending up in the emergency room or hospital at a much higher cost to taxpayers.

As more families struggle to make ends meet, Kentucky's elected officials should do everything in their power to ensure that our children are given the support they need to grow into healthy citizens who contribute to the long-term vitality of our state.