

January 15, 2009

I voted yesterday in support of our Nation's children and for passage of the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009, H.R. 2.

More than 7.1 million children have health insurance because of the creation, a decade ago, of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, SCHIP. However, these children will lose access to good, affordable health insurance if Congress does not act to reauthorize the SCHIP program by March 31, 2009.

Yesterday, the House approved the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009, which would expand the SCHIP program to ensure even more children have access to the health care their parents cannot afford or who work in jobs that do not provide health care benefits. The House of Representatives has passed similar legislation twice before to extend and expand SCHIP, only to have those bills vetoed by President Bush. I hope that on the third consideration of this legislation to improve children's health that this bill will be signed into law.

The expansion of this program is even more important today as many workers are losing their health insurance and face great economic hardships during the recent recession. The Kaiser Family Foundation projects that the current unemployment level of 7 percent would increase Medicaid and SCHIP enrollment by 2.4 million people and an additional 2.6 million people would become uninsured. The number of uninsured will rise higher should the unemployment rates climb even further. This legislation would reduce the size of this uninsured population by expanding SCHIP to include an additional 4 million children who currently have no health insurance. Sending a child to the emergency room is not an alternative to having comprehensive health insurance. Especially at a time when millions of families are facing economic hardships, we must ensure that children have the care they need.

This bill would provide parity for mental health for children. I long have fought for mental health parity, and was pleased that last year we could improve mental health coverage for private insurance plans and Medicare. I am encouraged that we have now extended this to the SCHIP program.

According to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, more than 45 million Americans lack health care coverage, including more than 16 percent of New Jersey's residents. Many of these

Americans are children, the vast majority of whom come from working families. It is simply unconscionable that here in the United States of America millions of children are uninsured. The reauthorization and expansion of the SCHIP program presents an historic opportunity to put an end to the morally unacceptable fact that 8.6 million American children live every day without insurance. It is time for Congress to preserve and expand this program that has proven successful at insuring our nation's most vulnerable children.

The SCHIP program is strongly supported by our nation's governors who have managed the State-run programs over the past decade and understand that SCHIP allows States to cover low-income children who lack health insurance in families of the working poor.

This bill also would provide the tools needed and create incentives for States to reach the millions of children who are eligible but not currently enrolled in the SCHIP program.

New Jersey uses its SCHIP funds to run a program called FamilyCare. Our State is a leader in extending FamilyCare eligibility. Currently, 150,000 children and approximately 100,000 low income-parents are enrolled in New Jersey's program.

Without SCHIP, all of these residents of New Jersey would again be uninsured.

This legislation would allow States like New Jersey to continue to set income eligibility for SCHIP. Because the cost of living is so high in New Jersey, it is important that our State has the flexibility needed to establish realistic eligibility guidelines.

Additionally, this bill would allow New Jersey to continue to enroll parents along with their children. According to research by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Sciences, one highly effective way of boosting coverage among low-income children is to broaden health insurance to their parents. Currently, New Jersey is one of 11 States to cover low-income parents.

Because we are committed to balanced budgets and opposed to deficit spending, this bill pays for this historic commitment to our children with an appropriate increase in the Federal tobacco

tax and by imposing restrictions on self-referral to physician-owned hospitals. According to the Campaign for Tobacco-free Kids, the 61 cent-per-pack increase in the cigarette tax that is included in this bill would result in substantially fewer youth smokers, as every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes would reduce youth smoking by approximately 7 percent. This would improve their health and result in longterm healthcare savings.

There are 11 million reasons to vote for this bill, each one a child who will move out of the ranks of the uninsured with the health care provided in the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act. A measure of a nation's greatness is how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. By making health insurance available for 11 million children, we live up to our moral obligation to keep children healthy and we make our society stronger.