

## Children called ‘gift of God,’ as faith leaders urge U.S. Congress to expand youth health care

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien

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WASHINGTON (CNS) – Jesuit Father John Baumann came to Washington from Oakland, Calif., in early March to tell members of Congress that "children are a gift from God and they deserve the blessing of good health."



And he was not alone. Hundreds of clergy and parents from across the country were on Capitol Hill March 7 for a Faith and Families Summit organized by the PICO National Network, the community organizing network that Father Baumann founded 35 years ago.

The Jesuit is executive director of the Oakland-based PICO, which began as the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations but changed its name in 2004 to People Improving Communities through Organizing.

The interfaith network now includes more than 1,000 congregations from 50 denominations or faith traditions, representing an estimated 1 million people in 17 states.

"Catholic parishes are so central to our inner cities across the country," he added. "And this fits in so well with Catholic social teaching."

**PRIEST APPLAUDS DURING HEALTH CARE RALLY ON CAPITOL HILL –** Jesuit Father Robert Fambrini, of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Diego, applauds during a March 7 rally on Capitol Hill in Washington calling for expanded federal funding for children's health care. Hundreds of clergy and parents from across the country attended the Faith and Families Summit organized by the PICO National Network. PICO stands for People Improving Communities through Organizing. (CNS)

As PICO members have sought to confront the problems in their communities, Father Baumann said, one issue came up time and again.

"We continually heard from parents that their children were not able to get proper health care," he said in an interview after a March 7 rally in a Senate office building that included remarks from four U.S. senators and four House members, representing both political parties.

Following the rally, approximately 400 PICO members visited congressional offices to deliver a united message: The State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, must be strengthened to provide health coverage for all children in the U.S.

The organization also offered a "road map" to help Congress reach that goal – by eliminating the shortfalls in federal assistance to states for SCHIP, increasing enrollment outreach efforts, building greater flexibility into the program and approving a 2008 federal budget resolution that provides \$60 billion for SCHIP over the next five years. States should also have the option of covering legal immigrant children and pregnant women, PICO says.

"The money is out there," Father Baumann said. "It's just a matter of priorities."

Similar calls for expanding and strengthening SCHIP have come from the Catholic Health Association, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Health Initiatives, the national Catholic social justice group Network and a wide variety of medical, insurance, business and community groups.

"Children's coverage is wildly popular because it works," said Bishop Roy Dixon of the Church of God in Christ in San Diego. He chairs the PICO board of directors.

"We're asking Congress to do the right thing in strengthening and expanding SCHIP, but we're also asking them to do the smart thing," he said in a statement.

Father Baumann said PICO members visited 125 congressional offices during the March 7 summit, but added that efforts would not end when the families and members of the clergy return home.

The lobbying group included 74 pastors, who pledged to bring the issue back to their congregations, the priest said. Other PICO members around the country will continue raising the issue through letters and other contacts with their members of Congress.

"We're not going to go away," Father Baumann said. "We're going to keep pushing."