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Community leaders urge government to fund kids' health insurance

East Bay Business Times - 5:40 PM PDT Monday, March 19, 2007 by [Marie-Anne Hogarth](#)

Religious and community leaders with Congregations Organizing for Renewal rallied Monday at the Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center in Hayward urging Congress to authorize some \$60 billion in new funding for the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Also on hand were the Alameda Alliance for Health's CEO, Ingrid Lamirault, and a representative from the office of the Alameda county supervisor, Alice Lai-Bitker.

The current appropriation is about \$5 billion a year.

The program, set to expire in September, provides insurance to some 6 million children across the country, including some 800,000 children in California through the state's Healthy Families Program. Some 9 million children across the country do not have insurance, despite the program's existence.

The additional \$60 billion would insure all children, even those not currently in the program, allowing states like California to increase eligibility.

Healthy Families covers children from families with an income of 250 percent of the federal poverty line, although some counties, such as Alameda, have programs to help low-income families that fail to meet the eligibility requirements.

"We feel there is growing support" for the \$60 billion appropriation, said Rev. Drew Nettinga, pastor at San Lorenzo Community United Church of Christ. "When this idea of health care for all children is polled, 84 percent of people feel that SCHIP should be expanded."

While lawmakers agree the program should be continued, they disagree about how much it should be funded.

President George Bush has proposed adding \$4.8 billion in SCHIP funding over five years to the program's current \$5 billion annual budget, an amount that would be insufficient to cover those enrolled in the current program.

An additional \$15 billion above current funding levels would insure children that are in the program now.

Without at least that increase, California faces a projected funding shortfall estimated at \$2.7 billion over the next five years. This would leave 40 percent of children enrolled in Healthy Families at risk of losing coverage altogether.

Not everybody feels that expanding the SCHIP program is the solution.

For example, Grace-Marie Tuner, president of the The Galen Institute, a nonprofit devoted to health care policy, writes, "SCHIP was designed to cover kids whose families make too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private coverage. But Congress decided to have the federal government match state spending at a higher percentage for higher-income SCHIP kids than for lower-income Medicaid children. This is bad policy. . . . Because of SCHIP's upside-down funding, states have an incentive to add more of their citizens to SCHIP because they are paid more by the federal government for doing so."

Advocates for increasing SCHIP funding say it will be an important part of California's health care reform.

"In order for the governor's plan to work out, or those (plans) suggested by Speaker (Fabian) Nunez and Don Perata, it needs SCHIP money," Nettinga said.

Last week, a coalition led by Parents Improving Communities Organizing, the parent organization of Congregations Organizing for Renewal, made some 125 visits with lawmakers in Washington, D.C., to advocate for the appropriation.

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