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Denver mom to lobby Congress on health care

Federal law that created CHP+ is set to expire at the end of this fiscal year

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As they consider how many billions - if any - to allocate to health-insurance programs for working-class kids, activist Susan Molina wants members of Congress to know exactly what is at stake: Children like hers.

When her husband left her, she had few skills, no high school diploma and two young children.

She got a job cleaning apartments, took classes to get her high school diploma - and enrolled her children, Joseph, now 10, and Bernadette, now 14, in the state's Child Health Plan Plus.

The Colorado version of the state and federal health-insurance partnership saw her kids through sprained ankles and infections, until her increased income meant she was no longer eligible.

The legislation that created CHP+ and its counterpart programs across the nation are set to expire at the end of this fiscal year.

This week, Molina's dual roles as advocate and mom take her to Washington to ask Congress to not only continue the program but expand it so more children, including hers, can get health care.

Molina, who chairs Denver-based Metro Organizations for People, and other child advocates are eager to expand the federal program, SCHIP, to cover more of the nation's estimated 9 million children without health insurance.

But that aim puts them at odds with President Bush.

In his budget proposal, the president states his desire to return SCHIP to its original purpose of covering children in low-income families.

Congresswoman Diana DeGette, D-Denver, sits on the committee that will decide the program's future.

DeGette said there is little opposition to SCHIP itself.

"The fight will become, 'Do we adequately fund it?'" she said.

Joe Barton, a Texas Republican, told the Congress Daily newspaper that some states have "abused" SCHIP by expanding it to adults and children whose families are better off.

"There's going to be a real fight over this," Barton told the political publication.

SCHIP spending is expected to top \$6 billion in the coming fiscal year. But funding will amount to only \$4.8 billion. The federal government has used money left over from the program's early years when enrollment was

low to make up the deficit, but that surplus is running out, the Congressional Reporting Service found.

An estimated 46,755 Colorado kids were enrolled in CHP+ at the end of 2006, according to the state Department of Health Care Policy and Financing.

The Colorado Children's Campaign estimates that 57,000 more are eligible but not enrolled.

Nationwide, the figures are similar: 6 million children are enrolled; the Kaiser foundation believes three-quarters of the 9 million children who lack health coverage are eligible.

In Colorado, a family of four can earn up to \$40,000 and still be eligible.

Colorado's CHP+ plus program faces yet another hurdle: the possibility of losing \$4 million because of a fight over terms of a settlement between tobacco companies and states.

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