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Detecting an improved prognosis on health care

Author: TOM MORAN; STAR-LEDGER STAFF

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For Congressman Frank Pallone, this week marked the start of something entirely new.

He's been pressing for more than a decade to expand health coverage to the uninsured. Now, with Democrats in control of Congress and millions more Americans losing coverage, the political momentum is finally swinging his way.

"I believe we're at a turning point," says Pallone (D-6th). "Everyone seems to realize now that something must be done."

Pallone, the chairman of Congress' key subcommittee on health care, took the gavel for the first time on Wednesday to run a hearing that focused on children without coverage.

About 9 million American kids have no health insurance, enough to fill Giants Stadium 120 times over.

Stop for a minute and consider just how pathetic that is for a nation as prosperous as ours.

It is bad enough that countries like France and Germany can find a way to insure all their citizens.

What Pallone heard Wednesday is that even poor countries like Cuba and Thailand are ahead of us when it comes to key measures of children's health, like infant mortality and immunization rates.

Now President Bush has proposed deep spending cuts in Medicaid and in a separate program called SCHIP, which provides coverage for more than 5 million children in working poor families.

That plan is dead. Even conservatives like U.S. Rep. Mike Ferguson (R-7th), who sits on Pallone's subcommittee, thinks the president is marching in the wrong direction.

"Clearly, that's just not going to happen," Ferguson says. "We have a good program and it needs more funding. A lot of people on my side of the aisle agree with that."

You have to wish President Bush could have sat in the audience Wednesday and listened to the testimony before Pallone's committee.

Jay Berkelhamer, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, looked at the problem first through the cold lens of cost and benefit.

The 9 million uninsured children in America don't go without care. We are not such a callous people that we would deny them treatment in emergency rooms, which serve as the great safety net for the uninsured.

But Berkelhamer pointed out how expensive that is, and how damaging it is to children in the long run. A kid with diarrhea who is so dehydrated he suffers brain damage. A kid with an untreated ear infection that left permanent damage to his hearing.

"That's what I've seen as a pediatrician," Berkelhamer said.

A young mother, Susan Molina of Colorado, broke down when she described watching her daughter's fever rise, and wondering at what point she should go to the emergency room, even if she were stuck with a bill she couldn't pay.

"I just had to wait and see," she said.

If you've ever fallen seriously ill, or watched someone close to you who has, you know that in some ways our health system is the best in the world. Arab sheiks fly here to get care. We work miracles if you can pay the bill.

But there are now 47 million people without coverage in America, a record. Most of them are in families with at least one full-time worker. The problem is far worse now than it was in 1993 when Bill Clinton took that last big swing for the fences.

That plan failed spectacularly, in part because Clinton tried to revamp everything, even for the majority of Americans who had insurance and felt satisfied with it.

Next time, says Pallone, Democrats are not likely to repeat the mistake. They will plug one hole after another, until everyone has coverage, leaving in peace those who already have insurance.

"A lot of us are talking now about filling the gaps, not redoing the whole system," he says. "But the environment is changing. There will be an effort to accelerate that kind of incremental change."

That effort began this week, starting with the children.

It's about time. Tom Moran may be reached at tmoran@starledger.com or (973) 392-1823.

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