

From The Morning Call
February 22, 2007

Don't let Bush cut funds that insure children

In last fall's elections, the people's voice was heard. Loud and clear. The people's voice needs to be heard again on a critical issue that soon will be voted on in our nation's capitol. This time it is even more urgent to speak up, for we will be giving voice to those who have no voice, and advocating for those who have no power: our children.

In 1997, Congress established the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). It provided health insurance to uninsured children whose family income was too high to qualify for Medicaid coverage but too low to enable the family to obtain private insurance. Funded by federal and state sources, the program worked well, enrolling nearly 150,000 children. However, it is estimated that 134,000 children in Pennsylvania still are uninsured.

Last November, our Pennsylvania legislature passed "Cover All Kids" legislation, extending healthcare coverage for all the children in our commonwealth. The SCHIP federal-state program is a foundation for that legislation. Sadly, this historic step in Pennsylvania is at risk because of the federal budget proposed by President Bush.

The current budget proposal provides less than half of the funding needed to provide coverage for children currently enrolled; it offers no funding to help states expand their coverage. How strange that the federal budget is so far out of step with actions being taken in New York, California, Illinois and New Jersey, as well as in Pennsylvania. All are trying to expand programs to help working families obtain coverage for their children. This has widespread public support, because ordinary people understand how shortsighted it would be for children to go without treatment or to rely on emergency rooms for their healthcare.

But who will speak for these children? There is no powerful lobby advocating for them. The insurers who provide policies for children under SCHIP often do so with slim profit margins. In fact, we spoke with one who said that his company loses money on SCHIP. Who will advocate for the children when legislators begin to sort through the president's ponderous budget?

Within Jewish tradition we find the words from the Book of Job that speak of our challenge: "His children are far from safety; they are crushed in the gate, and there is no one to save them." We must be the ones who will prevent our children from the crush of apathy. We also read in our Talmud, "The heritage of the Lord are children." All the more so, our children are our heritage, so then how can we abandon those who lack basic health care — check-ups, simple medical follow-up, medicines?

When we read the prophet's words, "May the hearts of children be turned to parents and the hearts of parents be turned to children," how can we allow legislators to

turn their hearts away from children by not insuring basic health care for the youngest among us?

In Christian tradition, we read that Jesus goes out of his way to bless children and says that it is to children that the kingdom of heaven belongs. His apostle, James, goes so far as to say that the meaning of religion, "pure and undefiled," is that one should "care for orphans ... in distress."

Doesn't cutting federal funding for SCHIP do just the opposite of what our religious traditions call us to do? Cutting federal funding means that our society essentially will be orphaning "little ones," depriving them of basic healthcare protection, ultimately leaving them "in distress."

Who will speak for the children? We are part of a faith-based community organizing group, Congregations United for Neighborhood Action. For the past eight years, CUNA has helped individuals, congregations, and the neighborhoods around them to address community issues and to work within the system to effect positive and constructive change. Recently, members of several congregations raised concerns about health insurance, so CUNA is beginning to address this issue, as well. If you also are concerned about these matters, we invite you to join us in a public meeting with U.S. Rep. Charlie Dent at 2 p.m. Sunday at Congregation Keneseth Israel, 2227 Chew St. in Allentown. We invite you to join us, to share your experience, to listen and learn, and to help give a voice to the children.

The Rev. Robert Stevens is pastor of Zion's Reformed UCC in Allentown. Rabbi Robert Lennick is rabbi at Congregation Keneseth Israel, also in Allentown.

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