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Faith-based groups want children's health care funded The United States spends \$8 billion every month in Iraq. But the president wants to halve the funding for children's health insurance.

By the Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews and Rep. Zoe Lofgren
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Last month, more than 500 people gathered at Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos to call on federal, state and local legislators to work together to fix the broken health care system in California. The standing-room-only event, organized by People Acting in Community Together (PACT) and Peninsula Interfaith Action, sent a clear signal about the level of concern that exists among everyday people in our county about the future of health care in our country.

Seven years ago, PACT and Working Partnerships USA led the community effort to make our county the first in the country to provide access to health insurance to all children. This historic program has become a model for similar programs in more than 20 counties in California, as well as for the new statewide campaign to insure all kids. Unfortunately, President Bush has proposed a budget that would cut the legs out from under these efforts, and the efforts of an increasing number of states, to cover the more than 9 million uninsured children in the country. While America spends \$8 billion to \$10 billion every month on the war in Iraq, Bush included less than half the funding needed to keep current children enrolled in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known in California as Healthy Families, and provided no money to help California expand coverage.

The president's budget proposes cuts in many domestic programs, including an 18 percent cut in heating assistance to low-income families. Yet cuts to children's health are particularly notable, because so many states, including those led by Republican governors, are moving toward full coverage. There is widespread public support for covering all children, because people understand that it is not right in this wealthy country for children to go without treatment or rely on the emergency room for their health care.

Bush's budget could put as many as 300,000 California children who currently have health coverage through the Healthy Families program at risk of losing their health insurance. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's health plan, on the other hand, moves forward by adding nearly 250,000 children to that program. The rub is that to accomplish this goal, 65 percent of the funding for Healthy Families would need to come from the federal government.

The PICO National Network issued a report last week based on data from the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities estimating that it would take \$6 billion to \$8 billion in new federal funding to support Schwarzenegger's proposal to cover all kids over five years. The absence of these new federal dollars would cripple the governor's plan.

Hundreds of congregations in California are working as part of the inter-faith PICO National Network on a national Cover All Children campaign. PICO is advocating that Congress provide enough funding to help states cover all children by 2012, as part of this year's reauthorization of the successful SCHIP. Finding the \$10 billion to \$12 billion annually to cover all children is possible if Congress and the president use common sense in setting federal budget priorities.

How would you explain to 9 million children that we have don't have money for their health care in the United States of America, but we have plenty of money for guns and bombs in Iraq?