

Close Orlando Edition

SOCIAL ACTION GROUPS

Interfaith network asks Congress to expand youth health care

Laura Dodson, Florida Catholic correspondent

Armed with hope and imbued with passion, 400 well-trained grassroots volunteers from around the country, including several Catholics from the Orlando Diocese, converged on Washington, D.C., March 6-8 to promote an agenda of health care for all God's children. During the "Faith and Families Summit," they prayed, convened press conferences and shared horror stories of life without medical care.

The grassroots volunteers, 74 of whom were clergy, are members of People Improving Communities through Organizing, commonly known as the PICO National Network, an international organization founded by Jesuit Father John Baumann that represents 1,000 religious congregations in 150 cities and 17 states.

Phoebe Hughes, an activist veteran from St. Andrew Parish in Orlando, explained the challenge. "Our church is a diverse community — a wonderful mix. Most of our parishioners have jobs, but many small-business owners can't afford to provide insurance. Even legal immigrants have a one-year waiting period for children to be covered under Medicaid. There are people who have to decide between seeing a doctor for medical help and eating."

Sylvia Ruiz, also from St. Andrew, put a human face on the gravity of the situation with her testimony at the press conference March 7. Ruiz is operations manager for an advertising agency. She is a separated, single mother of two boys, Brandon, 5, and Bryan, 3, and the monthly premium for family medical insurance coverage, \$675, is far outside her budget to provide.

She told of taking a sick 2-year-old Brandon to his pediatrician, whom he had seen since birth, and being told that because Brandon was no longer covered by insurance, he would have to go to the emergency room for care. "No parent, grandparent or caregiver should ever experience holding an ailing child and being told, 'You have to go to the ER and wait 20 hours,'" Ruiz said.

PICO Network congregations are well-trained in organizing, researching to understand the issues and



COURTESY PHOTO

Members of the interdenominational Congregations for Community Action, all from Brevard County, rest for a moment before visiting members of Congress to conduct a "Congressional Conversation on Children's Health." The meetings were part of the March 6-8 "Faith and Families Summit" in Washington. From left to right are Shirley Broomfield, Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church; Pat Bradley, Our Lady of Lourdes Parish; Lou Iparraguirre, Holy Name of Jesus; and Kathy Drane and Tami Yntema, both from Our Lady of Lourdes.

collaborating with public officials to accomplish the betterment of all. Delegates to the Faith and Family Summit met with senators, representatives and their staffs. Not only were they listened to — some PICO members said — they were actually heard.

Lou Iparraguirre, a member of Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Indialantic and a veteran of the legislative and congressional process, marveled at the experience. "This summit was like the Red Sea parting — doors opened. All the politicians we spoke with agreed that children need to be provided health care."

Less than a week later, March 15, the Senate Budget Committee agreed to double the funding of the State Children's Health Insurance Program to \$50 billion over the next five years. The full Senate approved the funding March 23 and it is under consideration in the House. That gives 9 million uninsured children — more than 700,000 in Florida alone — cause for hope.

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There are four PICO federations — groups of churches who join together — in Florida. Two of them, Congregations for Community Action, representing nine churches from Brevard County, and Federation of Congregations United to Serve, representing 14 churches in the greater Orlando area, sent five and 10 delegates, respectively, to the summit.

This was a first visit to congress for Tami Yntema from Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Melbourne. Yntema said, "The amount of faith, commitment and professionalism of PICO was astounding. This was a life-altering experience. I don't think this will be the last time that I'll go to Washington to be a part of something. We'll be back!"

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