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Religious leaders join in backing health care for uninsured kids

RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

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WASHINGTON – An unusually broad coalition of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders descended on Capitol Hill this week to push Congress to increase funds for health care coverage for America's 9 million uninsured children.

“Although we come from diverse backgrounds and religious beliefs, we all agree” that children in need should be helped, said the Rev. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, at a news conference Tuesday.

The leaders joined with the People Improving Communities through Organizing National Network, a faith-based social justice group, and Families USA, a health care advocacy organization, to make universal children's health care a “moral imperative.”

The Rev. Eileen Lindner, deputy general secretary of the National Council of Churches, said she could not think of another time when such a broad array of religious leaders had come together on one issue, especially when many of them disagree on so many other issues.


The groups are working for the reauthorization and expansion of the federal health care program for low-income children, the State Children's Health Insurance Program. The groups estimate the program will cost \$60 billion over five years, but President Bush has proposed restricting eligibility and capping federal funding at about \$5 billion.

“This is not an issue that ought to have a label of Democrat or Republican,” said Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass. “This is an issue of common sense, and it is also a moral issue.”

Land also emphasized the need for unity among religious leaders on health care coverage. “Some say (health care coverage) is all well and good, but we should focus on the main thing, pro-life issues,” he said. “I say the focus on health care is pro-life. We're not pro-life just from conception to birth.”

The Rev. Bob Edgar, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches and a former Democratic member of Congress from Pennsylvania, said “political will” is the key to improving children's health care coverage.

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