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## Organizers go to Capitol seeking health care funds for nation's kids

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Staff writer*

Some 400 clergy and parents from community organizations across the country traveled to Washington, D.C., early this month bearing facts and figures about the urgent need for increased health care funding for children.

But facts and figures were only the half of it. Honoring the adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words," they arrived on Capitol Hill March 7 bearing photos as well – pictures of youngsters and teens who are without health care coverage or who could be without it if the State Children's Health Insurance program, known as SCHIP, is not renewed and upped to \$60 billion this September to cover increased medical costs and pave the way for health care coverage for all children by 2012.



Jesuit Father John Baumann of Oakland leads a group of clergy and parents at a March 7 rally on Capitol Hill in Washington calling for expanded federal funding for children's health care.

CNS PHOTO/BOB ROLLER

SCHIP is a federal program initiated in 1997 which provides states with block grant funding to offer affordable health coverage to children whose parents cannot obtain family coverage at work.

The Bush Administration's new budget proposes to cut \$13 billion from SCHIP and the broader Medicaid program, which provides coverage to the poorest children in the country. It would limit funding for children in families earning more than 200 percent of the poverty level, even though 16 states currently cover children in families above this income level.

Nationally there are 4.5 million children in families earning between 200 and 300 percent of poverty who are either uninsured or depend on public coverage, according to PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), the Oakland-based organization that sponsored the advocacy effort in Washington. PICO was founded by Jesuit Father John Baumann 35 years ago.

If the budget cuts are made, some 322,000 children in California alone would lose their SCHIP coverage and join the 750,000 in California who are currently uninsured.

Forty-one East Bay members of OCO (Oakland Community Organizations), CCISCO (Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization,) and COR (Congregations Organizing for Renewal) in Hayward joined representatives from 49 other PICO organizations throughout the country for the Faith and Families Summit to make their case for children's health care coverage.

They also want states to have the option of offering the coverage to all children, regardless of their immigration status by 2012 as well as pregnant women.

"Children are a gift from God and they deserve the blessing of good health," Father Baumann told members of Congress.

"The money is out there. It's just a matter of priorities," he said.

Carolyn Krantz, pastoral associate at St. Peter Martyr Parish in Pittsburg, and Ann Snyder, CCISCO board president and a member of St. Joseph Parish in Pinole, were among those who brought pictures of children to show to legislators.

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Krantz had photos of her teen liturgical dance group, Damas de Dios (Ladies of God), a dozen teen-aged girls who are without health care coverage. "We wanted to put faces on the pain," said Krantz.

Snyder carried a picture of her 16-year-old grandson who has health coverage through SCHIP. Two years ago, the lad could have been in trouble when his dad had to take early retirement and lost health insurance because his company does not insure children of retirees. Because of Healthy Families, a part of SCHIP, however, the teen was eligible for continued coverage.

Health care coverage for all kids should be a given, said Snyder. "They are our future. How can a child stay in school and concentrate on learning when he or she has ongoing medical problems? Instead of learning, the whole focus of life becomes the illness."

Delegates had a new name for their efforts in the Capitol, said Krantz. They substituted the traditional description – lobbying—for what one preacher called "witnessing – witnessing for the needs of the poor."

As a part of their witness, they formed prayer circles in the halls of the House and the Senate. "People had to pass us to get to their offices," Krantz said.

No one was annoyed. Rather, people seemed impressed. One congressional aide told the East Bay group, "Please come back. You are restoring our souls," said Krantz.

She noted that on several occasions, "those with whom we did not have an appointment stopped from their busy schedules and spent time with us to hear about the suffering of children."

Because of PICO's nationally concerted organizing efforts over the past four years to bring the cause of children's health care to the Capitol, eight legislators were on hand to support them during a joint press conference with members of the National Council of Churches on March 7. The NCC also wants health coverage for all children.

"Press Club officials told us that they never before had so many come from Congress to speak like this," Krantz said.

Another highlight was a prayer breakfast attended by all of the delegates, planned by the 60 clergy representatives.

Divine Word Father Roberto Flores, pastor of St. Bernard Parish in Oakland, was there and said he was elated by the visible "power of God. It united us all around the rights of people, despite our religions." St. Bernard Parish is 80 percent Latino. Many couples and their children are without health coverage, he said. St. Bernard's is part of OCO, the local PICO network.

The witnessing efforts of the 400 delegates seem to have resulted in an initial legislative success, said Krantz. Soon after their Washington visit, on March 15, the Senate Budget Appropriations voted 12 to 11 in favor of adding \$50 billion dollars to the health care initiative. "It's not the \$60 billion we asked for, but we'll accept it," she said.

Local activism around SCHIP continues. On March 19, COR clergy, community leaders, health experts and parents attended a budget rally for children's health coverage at Tiburcio Vasquez Health Clinic in Hayward.

PICO's social justice advocacy network now includes more than 1,000 congregations from 50 denominations or faith traditions, representing an estimated one million people in 17 states. About half the members are Catholic.

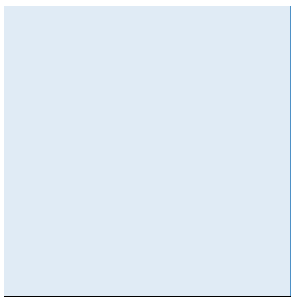
*(Nancy Frazier O'Brien from Catholic News Service contributed to this story.)*



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