

An Rx for healthy children

By: North County Times Opinion staff

Our view: Our nation must be able to afford to provide health care coverage for uninsured kids

With health care dominating political campaigns, news headlines and even some movie theaters, Americans of all stripes are once again debating the state of our health system. No matter where you might come down on the issue ---- socialized medicine, privatization or somewhere in between ---- we should all be able to agree that every child deserves access to medical care, regardless of the ability of his or her family to pay for it.

Created in 1997 to help the states expand health care coverage to uninsured children, the State Children's Health Insurance Program is a federal block grant that helps around 5 million kids nationwide. California calls its version the Healthy Families Program; it provides all or part of the health care coverage for more than 775,000 children, children whose families can't afford health insurance but make too much to qualify for Medicaid (Medi-Cal in our state). Health professionals and children's advocates consider the program a huge success.

But time and money are running out for this much-needed program. Its 10 years are up, and funding will expire Sept. 30 unless Congress and the president take action soon. That funding needs not just extending but also increasing. In California, for example, federal contributions provide only about 65 percent of the funding needed to operate Healthy Families.

The Democratic-controlled Congress is poised to approve a [major expansion of the program](#). A House bill approved Wednesday would boost the state program funding by \$47 billion over five years and extend coverage to an additional 5 million children. The Senate's version, which was to have been voted upon late last night, is expected to boost the program by \$35 billion over five years and add 3 million youngsters. Both would be financed, at least in part, by an increase in the federal tobacco tax ---- which will have the added benefit of steering some of those children away from more expensive cigarettes.

Republicans have lined up against what would be the most significant growth of a federally funded health program since the SCHIP program was first created. President Bush has vowed to veto the bill. Their objections are worth a listen.

Under the current rules, 19 states have received waivers that allow them to provide the state health services to "needy" families that make more than federal poverty level. New York recently allowed a family of four with an annual household income of [up to \\$80,000](#) to qualify for some assistance. Waivers also allow the states to provide some health services that were meant for children to adults.

Republicans also argue that by expanding the program the government is providing an incentive for families to leave the private health care system, thereby increasing the number of people reliant on taxpayer-funded health care. It's for these reasons that Congressmen Brian Bilbray, Darrell Issa and Duncan Hunter ---- Republicans from Solana Beach, Vista and El Cajon, respectively ---- say they voted against the bill.

But these objections, some of which have been addressed in the Senate version of the bill, are swept away by the overwhelming need of many children who, through no fault of their own, do not have health care coverage. It's estimated that in California alone there are 1 million who don't. These children are by accident of birth denied a cornerstone of the equal opportunity that undergirds the American dream.

The raging debate over health care in this country is an important one, but the issue of providing medical services to uninsured kids must rise above it. The present and future health of young Americans is something we must be able to afford, if we are to thrive as a nation. If President Bush wants to wield his rarely seen veto pen, we can suggest far better candidates than this extension and expansion of children's health care coverage