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Religious Groups Push Health Coverage for Children

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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 American'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 press conference on Tuesday (March 6).

The leaders joined with the People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) 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 clergy members gathered in Washington represented 106 million American believers, she added.

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. PICO estimates 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., a 2004 presidential candidate. "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.

"As a minister, I know we have the moral authority to call this a moral issue," he told a crowd of supporters.

At a budget rally on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, Sylvia Ruiz from Orlando, Fla., said she could not afford health care for her two sons, ages 3 and 5. She said she was forced to spend long hours at emergency rooms in order to obtain medical care for them.

An enthusiastic crowd chanted, "What do we want? \$60 billion! When do we want it? Now!"

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, told a gathering at the National Press Club that too many children are dying because of lack of health care.

The legislative push came one week after Deamonte Driver, 12, died just outside Washington on Feb. 25 when bacteria from an abscessed tooth spread to his brain. His family did not have health insurance or Medicaid, and doctors later said an \$80 tooth extraction could have saved his life.

"Even one child who dies prematurely who could have been saved with adequate health care is unacceptable," said Saperstein. "The hundreds that die is unconscionable."

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