

## Editorial: Children's health funds at risk

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Ten years ago, in one of its proudest moments, Santa Clara County became the first in the nation to set a goal of making sure every child has health insurance.

The results have been nearly miraculous. Nearly every child under age 5 now has access to coverage. The number of uninsured kids has dropped from 70,000 in 1997 to roughly 11,000 today. That success has made the county a model for the nation.

But the goal is not complete, and the gains so far are fragile. That's why Santa Clara County should lead the fight for Congress to continue to build on the funding of the nation's State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).

About 6.6 million children now are covered by the program. But health care costs are rising, so to maintain and build on that Congress is working on a plan to increase spending. Otherwise, thousands of kids in Santa Clara County - and millions across America - will fall off the roles of the insured.

That makes President Bush's opposition to the proposed five-year, \$35 billion budget increase unforgivable. The president likes to portray himself as a compassionate conservative, but his threatened veto exposes the absurdity of that notion.

Expanding health coverage to children has been one of Congress' highest domestic priorities this year. For good reason: Polls show that more than 80 percent of Americans favor universal coverage for children.

Republican and Democratic leaders in the Senate deserve credit for forging the agreement last week on an increase in the cigarette tax to pay for the expansion.

The Senate Finance Committee should unanimously approve the agreement and send it to the full Senate - which should send Bush a message by passing the bill with enough votes to override a veto.

It's bad enough that roughly 46 million Americans lack health insurance. But the fact that 6.8 million children still have no coverage in this rich country is indefensible - especially since it does not reflect the will of the American people.

Beyond the moral imperative, most Americans intuitively realize the long-term savings of providing coverage to children.

Children who have access to medical care are demonstrably healthier than their uninsured counterparts. They're more likely to get routine checkups, where doctors can identify vision, hearing and speaking disabilities - problems that, if ignored, often result in bright children being tagged as "learning disabled." Healthy kids do better in school and are more likely to become productive members of society.

The program before Congress isn't a giveaway. It provides for federal, state and local governments to share the burden of taking care of poor children.

For example, it provides states with federal matching funds to provide health care to children whose family income is too high to qualify for Medicaid but not high enough to afford private insurance. The states in turn offer matching funds to local governments hoping to expand coverage.

Santa Clara County was one of the first to realize the potential benefits. It started the groundbreaking Healthy Kids program, which has provided low-cost health coverage to tens of thousands of children. Other counties saw the benefits and hopped on board.

President Bush's opposition to the plan in Congress would be more acceptable if he proposed an alternative. But in his 6 1/2 years in office, he has done virtually nothing to reduce the number of uninsured children in the United States. It's a sad commentary on the Bush presidency.

The compromise plan provides hope for a healthier future for an additional 3.3 million uninsured children. Congress must fill the leadership void and guarantee that it becomes law.

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