



The Republican.

Amended children's health bill faces veto

Friday, November 02, 2007

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@newhouse.com WASHINGTON - The Senate yesterday approved a slightly modified Children Health Insurance Program bill to cover four million more children, but the 64-30 vote isn't enough to sustain a veto from President Bush.

Bipartisan support to spend \$12 billion a year over five years, up from \$7 billion yearly, on the program that pays for six million children has waned since the president's veto of the first CHIP bill last month with Republicans claiming yesterday that the Democratic leadership did little to work with the White House on a compromise.

Immediately following the vote, U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, whose work began the program 10 years ago, said, "it's time for the president to measure up."

"For the sake of our children and for the sake of our nation, I urge the president to sign this compromise children's health legislation," Kennedy said.

The president has indicated he would veto the revised bill.

U.S. Sen. Michael B. Enzi, R-Wyo., the top GOP member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, accused Democrats of failing to strike an agreement on a program that helps working poor and middle class families afford health insurance for their children.

CHIP passed the House and Senate at the end of September and the president vetoed it on Oct. 3.

Kennedy argued that the House changed the vetoed CHIP bill to tighten up regulations concerning coverage to immigrants and adults. He disputed the White House figures concerning household income eligibility and pointed out it was the Bush administration that approved state waivers this year to allow adults in the program and to extend the income eligibility up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level.

Despite those changes, Reid said the White House still wasn't satisfied with the new bill. The House passed its first bill on Sept. 25 by a 265-159 vote. Two days later, the Senate passed it by a veto-proof vote of 67-29.

Kennedy, during floor debate, said that the CHIP program would be funded through a 61-cent tax hike on cigarettes, a tax he said would probably stop some of the 3,000 children who reportedly start smoking every day from picking up the addiction.

The president was critical that the bill cost too much and went beyond its original intent.

In his veto, Bush argued that in 14 states, adults were allowed to join the program while there were still about a half-million children living at 200 percent of the federal poverty level who were not enrolled in the program that was designed specifically for that population. The president said that the program also covered families up to \$83,000 a year, telling people during a visit to Lancaster, Pa., "that doesn't sound poor to me."

But Kennedy, the chairman of the Senate health committee, disputed the president's claims, saying, "let me tell you how many families making \$83,000 a year are enrolled in CHIP: None."

"This (program) is targeted for working families; more than 92 percent are under 200 percent of the poverty level," Kennedy said, adding that translated to \$42,000 for a family of four.

Kennedy argued that members of Congress, who make about \$160,000 a year, have 72 percent of their health insurance paid for by U.S. taxpayers.

The senator cited the case of Springfield mother Dedra A. Lewis and her 9-year-old daughter, Alexsiana, who has a rare eye disease so serious that Lewis needed to reduce her work hours to tend to her daughter. He cited the case of Greenfield mother Flor Vega who, through CHIP money, was able to afford a nebulizer for her 5-year-old daughter, who has chronic asthma. The portable machine delivers the medicine more efficiently during asthmatic episodes and reduces the need to go to the emergency room, thus reducing overall health care costs.

Springfield mother Dedra A. Lewis, who has three daughters, told The Republican on Wednesday that the federal Children Health Insurance Program was a saving grace for her.

"I can't even explain how important it is to my family," Lewis said during a telephone interview. "Without it, I would be going through everything. I would probably be kicked out of my apartment and my daughter would probably be blind by now."

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