

Obama expands children's health insurance program: A victory for SCHIP

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On his 16th day in office, President Obama signed a bill expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) by \$32 billion, providing coverage to an additional 4 million children in families who have incomes too high to receive Medicaid but who cannot afford to buy health insurance.

"This is truly a moment to celebrate," said Clare J. Chapman, CEO of the National Council of Churches, who witnessed the White House signing ceremony. The NCC is among a number of religious groups that have supported expansion of SCHIP and similar measures.

The House voted 289-139 in favor of the bill January 14 and signed off on minor changes by the Senate February 4 on a vote of 290-135. The president signed the measure into law later in the day.

"This is only the first step," Obama said. "As I see it, providing coverage for 11 million children is a down payment on my commitment to cover every single American."

President Bush twice vetoed measures in the last Congress to expand the program, saying it would move the nation toward socialized medicine. Previously due to run out March 31, SCHIP currently covers about 7 million children across the country.

A federal program authorized under Title XXI of the Social Security Act, SCHIP provides matching funds to states while giving broad guidelines for individual states as they set their own standards for designing and administering the program.

The new guidelines provide coverage for children from birth until age 19, said Jocelyn Guyer, deputy executive director at the Georgetown Center for Children and Families. They also allow coverage of pregnant women.

Prior to voting 66-32 to reauthorize SCHIP January 29, the Senate rejected an amendment that would have guaranteed that states have the right to extend coverage to children before they are born. That would have put into a law a pro-life regulation implemented by the Bush administration in 2002.

Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, called rejection of the amendment “tragic” and “yet one more example that America is sadly becoming an antichild culture.” Land also criticized the legislation expanding SCHIP as “nothing less than creeping socialized medicine by stealth,” according to Baptist Press.

Previous House and Senate votes on the measure have fallen largely along party lines, but religious groups like the PICO National Network, a faith-based coalition of 1,000 congregations spanning the political spectrum that presses for health care for the nation’s children, say it is not a partisan but rather a moral issue.

“I am very conservative,” Roy Dixon, a bishop in the Church of God in Christ and a lifelong Republican, told reporters in a conference call January 4. “I have been that way all my life, but I believe that our children definitely need SCHIP, and I’m very glad that it has passed and will be signed today.”

With passage of the federal bill, action now turns to the states. “It’s a good day for kids,” Guyer said. “More work [needs] to be done, but [it’s] a very good day for kids.”

Funding the increase in part is a 60-cent tax increase on cigarettes to about \$1 a pack. Supporters say the provision adds to health benefits, because if tobacco products are too expensive, the number of people who smoke might be reduced. Opponents contend that the tax increase unfairly burdens smokers.

“Increasing the federal tobacco tax to fund SCHIP is a win-win proposal that will help children get the health care they need, while also acting as a deterrent to young smokers and potential smokers,” the American Medical Association said in a statement. *–Associated Baptist Press*