

Gazette Opinion: Bush puts politics first, U.S. children last

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Behind closed doors with no press or fanfare at the White House, President Bush Wednesday officially rejected bipartisan legislation that would continue and expand a successful 10-year-old program that is providing health insurance to about 6 million U.S. children, including 15,238 Montana children.

Bush denounced the bill reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Program as too expensive. His arguments and those of other opponents of this SCHIP legislation are wrong at best and downright heartless at worst. Bush has called for limiting SCHIP funding over the next five years to far less than the program needs to continue covering the number of low- to moderate-income children it now covers. The legislation, written mostly by a bipartisan group of U.S. senators in the Finance Committee chaired by Montana Sen. Max Baucus, proposes to increase the number of children covered with specific provisions for outreach to uninsured children in rural and minority populations.

Bush has criticized SCHIP as a step toward "socialized medicine." In fact, the children's program is government payment of private health care purchases - like Medicare for kids.

Montana's program

The federal government has provided the bulk of funding for SCHIP over the past decade. But the program requires that states pay a portion, so state leaders must decide how much they want to invest in children's health. In Montana, the Legislature and governors have taken a conservative approach. Montana Children's Health Insurance Plan isn't an entitlement; it is funded with a biennial appropriation. In Montana, the maximum annual income that qualifies a child for CHIP is \$23,958 for a single parent and one child or \$36,138 for a family of four people. The program is free or low-cost to families, depending on income. The state pays for the care that Montana CHIP kids receive, but contracts with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana to administer claims and benefits. The children, ages birth through 18, receive care from hospitals, doctors and clinics all across Montana.

Providing timely, appropriate health care to children is not only the right thing to do, it saves money. Children with insurance, including those in CHIP, are more likely to get regular checkups, to receive immunizations against childhood diseases and to be brought in for needed medical care sooner, rather than later when the problem has become more serious and costly to treat.

Override the veto

To their credit, both Montana Sen. Jon Tester and Rep. Denny Rehberg supported the pro-children bill that Baucus co-authored. Unfortunately, Wyoming Sens. Mike Enzi and John Barrasso voted against it. Rep. Barbara Cubin, R-Wyo., was recovering from an injury and didn't vote.

Members of Congress who care about children's health must override the veto. We expect Baucus and Tester to be leaders in affirming the Senate's strong stand for children. Rehberg should work to persuade more of his GOP colleagues to support SCHIP. And Cubin should join the bipartisan majority in voting for children's health.

On the eve of Bush's veto, Baucus took the unusual step of running radio and TV ads touting the SCHIP bill he wrote. The ads remind Montanans how important access to health care is in a state where one in five residents under age 65 don't have coverage. However, those who most need to take Baucus' message to heart are back in Washington, D.C., where politics again has trumped the needs of American children.