



Posted on Fri, Sep. 28, 2007

Child health bill OK'd

Senate passes plan to spend more on children; S.C. senators oppose it; Bush threatens veto

By JAMES ROSEN

jrosen@mcclatchydc.com

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate, without the support of South Carolina's senators, easily passed a bill Thursday to more than double spending on a health care program for low-income children.

The Senate's 67-29 vote for a \$35 billion expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP) — to a total of \$60 billion over five years — would help S.C.'s plans to more than double the number of children SCHIP covers.

The vote came two days after the House approved similar legislation funded largely by a 61-cent hike in the federal cigarette tax to \$1 a pack.

President Bush has vowed to veto the bill. Congress needs a two-thirds vote in both houses to override the veto. Whether that will happen is uncertain.

Congress' confrontation with Bush over medical care for kids echoes the dispute in South Carolina three months ago, when both chambers of the S.C. General Assembly overwhelmingly nullified Gov. Mark Sanford's veto of a \$22 million expansion of the state's SCHIP program.

The South Carolina expansion, which would add 70,000 minors to the 61,148 already covered, requires a federal expansion because Washington pays more than 78 cents of every dollar state government pays. Nearly 100,000 children in the Palmetto State lack health insurance.

The congressional measure's backers said it would provide medical care for 4 million uninsured children nationwide. The SCHIP program already covers 6.6 million children.

Eighteen Republican senators broke with Bush and joined all 50 Senate Democrats and Independent Joe Lieberman to support the bill.

Sens. Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint of South Carolina were among the 30 Republicans who opposed it.

"We need to have an American goal that every citizen is going to have access to good health care and health insurance," DeMint said on the Senate floor. "This is not the way to do it. This is a decision to become more like socialized Europe — to sell out our freedoms and to give the government control of our health care."

Graham echoed Bush's concerns that expanding the program to cover families with incomes up to three times the federal poverty level — currently reaching about \$61,950 — speeds movement toward a federal health care system.

"This bill doubles the cost of the SCHIP program and is a giant step toward nationalized health care," Graham, of Seneca, said.

"In addition, no longer are we just covering low-income children, but adults can now join the program," he said. "Finally, we encourage families to drop private insurance and join the government program. This is a very bad day for our health care system and the American taxpayer."

Opponents said the congressional legislation would lead many parents to drop private health insurance and replace it with SCHIP coverage.

A recent Congressional Budget Office report said more than one-third of the new participants would drop private health insurance in order to enroll.

In the Senate debate Thursday, Democrats mocked Bush's claim the SCHIP expansion is too expensive. They noted he is about to ask Congress to approve \$190 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The president has requested that we spend as much in about one month of the war in Iraq as it costs in our (SCHIP) bill to cover 10 million children for a year," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

Rep. Jim Clyburn of Columbia, the No. 3 House leader as majority whip, called on Bush to withdraw his veto threat.

"It's time he joins the 43 Republican and Democratic governors, the 270 national organizations and the hundreds of lawmakers in Congress to reauthorize and strengthen SCHIP to provide health care coverage for 10 million American children," Clyburn said.

In voting to expand South Carolina's SCHIP program in June, the Legislature raised its family income ceiling from 150 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty line — to about \$41,300.

Twenty-three states have income ceilings higher than 200 percent. Fifteen have obtained federal waivers allowing them to cover adults with SCHIP funds.

The decade-old program was designed to fund health care for children in families with incomes too high for Medicaid, but too low to afford private health insurance.

The federal government has provided \$25 billion over the last five years. Bush wants to reauthorize it at \$30 billion through 2012, but the Democratic-controlled Congress is pushing for twice as much.

In the House vote Tuesday, the South Carolina delegation split among party lines. Democratic Reps. Clyburn and John Spratt of York supported the SCHIP expansion; Republican Reps. Joe Wilson of Lexington, Bob Inglis of Travelers Rest, Henry Brown of Hanahan and Gresham Barrett of Westminster voted against it.

"It's too much money," Barrett said. "Twenty-two million smokers are going to pay for this thing."

Rosen covers Washington for McClatchy Newspapers in South Carolina.