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The Honorable John D. Dingell
2328 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Dingell:

The National Health Law Program (NHeLP) would like to commend you for your introduction of the Children's Health First Act, as we strongly support the enactment of this legislation. For over thirty-five years, NHeLP has advocated for the provision and improvement of health care for America's working and unemployed poor, women and children, minorities, immigrants, the elderly and people with disabilities. Passage of the Children's Health First Act would represent a major step forward in the effort to insure quality health care for all of America's children.

The bill contains many common sense provisions designed to encourage greater access to and participation in the State Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicaid. Both of these programs have proven to be highly successful and efficient means for covering children, but years of experience have revealed ways in which each could be improved. The Children's Health First Act contains many of those improvements. These include incentives and options for states to increase outreach and facilitate enrollment, to improve continuity of care through a one-year enrollment period, and to cover a broader array of beneficiaries. For example, in addition to expanding federal support for states that cover children up to 400% of the poverty level, the Act also would allow states to cover lawful immigrant children and pregnant women. This approach is not only humane, but also a wise investment. Also, the option to provide coverage up to age 25 will allow states to account for the large number of young people who presently cannot afford insurance at all.

The bill also strikes the right balance by building in incentives for employers to provide quality health care coverage, and to continue to provide that coverage to employees who might otherwise qualify under the Act. Given the heavy reliance of our health care system on employer based insurance, the Act wisely contains provisions designed to expand and improve coverage without undermining the current value provided by employer coverage.

In short, the Children's Health First Act provides a thoughtful and significant approach to covering the 9 million children who currently lack health care. If passed, the Act would go a long way toward redressing that shameful situation, and the National Health Law Program strongly supports your effort to do that.

Sincerely,

Laurence M. Lavin
Director

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