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NEWS RELEASE

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Losing Focus by Senator Larry Craig

“Mission creep” is a phrase that describes a phenomenon all too common in government. Once a program or project is established, its administrators and supporters sometimes begin looking for ways to expand the program to accomplish objectives beyond its initial mission. Sadly, it appears that mission creep is the best way to describe congressional Democrats’ ideas for reauthorization of SCHIP – the State Children’s Health Insurance Program.

Interestingly, if you do a Google search on “mission creep,” one of the links that turns up goes to a U.S. Army website, which identifies examples of mission creep in the Lewis and Clark Expedition. So, while the phrase might be new, the concept it describes is not.

SCHIP was created by the Republican-controlled Congress in 1997 to help states provide health coverage to the children of working poor families who, nevertheless, made too much to qualify for Medicaid. SCHIP was supposed to cover low-income children between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and by and large, it has been successful. Between 1996 and 2005, the number of uninsured children in this income bracket dropped 25 percent.

However, the program also has its problems. Figures from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) show that while SCHIP was designed to cover children, 670,000 adults participated in the program last year, and 13 percent of SCHIP funds will go to adults other than expectant mothers. Some states have even expanded the program to cover adults without children, and the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Michael Leavitt has pointed out that Wisconsin spends 75 percent of its SCHIP funds on adults, covering twice as many adults as children.

Now, some Senate Democrats have proposed a massive expansion of SCHIP, I suspect in an effort to move the United States ever-closer to a government-run health care system. They have proposed raising the eligibility requirement, so that a family of four, making as much as \$82,600 a year, can qualify for this taxpayer-funded health insurance.

But the overwhelming majority of children in this income bracket are already insured, and experts have shown that offering these families SCHIP coverage will simply drive them to drop the private coverage they already have. The cost of such an expansion will also cost taxpayers a whopping \$50 billion, which will likely come from increased taxes.

[MORE]

CRAIG Page 2 – Losing Focus

In short, such an expansion won't result in significantly more children being insured. They will simply be insured at taxpayer expense instead of by their parents.

Instead of looking for ways to expand SCHIP, Congress ought to be looking for ways to improve its effectiveness. We should be looking for ways to get some of the 670,000 adults off the rolls of a program that was intended to cover children. Republicans and Democrats alike want to reduce the number of uninsured children, so we should first acknowledge that there are 689,000 children who are already eligible for SCHIP coverage, but aren't participating. This program needs to be streamlined and improved, not expanded.

Finally, any reforms to SCHIP need to be market-oriented solutions. We should give families the power to control their health care decisions, without moving us all closer to bloated, inefficient, government-run health care and sticking taxpayers with the bill.

As I work to reauthorize SCHIP in the coming weeks, these are the principles for which I'll be fighting. At the same time, I'll renew the battle with that age-old problem that has plagued government for centuries and threatens SCHIP now – mission creep.