

September 25, 2007

TO: Members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives

FROM: The International Parish Nurse Resource Center
Rev. Dr. Deborah Patterson, Executive Director

RE: The State Children's Health Insurance Program

The United States – the richest nation in the world – is home to over nine million children who do not have access to needed health care. For those affected, this is a personal and medical crisis; for others it is an economic or political crisis. But because we have the capacity to solve the problem and won't, for all of us it is a moral crisis. How much longer can we live with ourselves knowing that our children are living sicker and dying younger simply because they cannot get the health care they need?

There are 11,000 Parish Nurses in congregations across the country who believe that all of us have been created in the image of God, and in each new act of creation, we are given the sacred obligation to care for one another. Such care includes tending to the health of our neighbors. In light of that obligation, the faith communities in which we serve are committed to issues integral to health and health care.

It will take all of us – individuals, families, communities, states and the federal government – working together and sharing responsibility for our children's health care needs. With the pending reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), we are writing to ask you to accept responsibility for the role the federal government must take. We thank you for taking the first steps toward reauthorizing and expanding SCHIP. Knowing that the process has been tumultuous, your perseverance in doing the right thing for our children is commendable. But we know the job is not finished until the two houses of Congress have reconciled the differences in the two bills, reauthorized SCHIP and funded it at the level needed to move toward getting ALL of our children the health care they need.

Toward that end, we are requesting three things:

1. **We urge you to reauthorize and expand SCHIP** before it expires on September 30, to protect those children who already are in the program and to provide services to others who are long overdue in getting the health care they need. When polls show that 84% of us support the reauthorization and expansion of SCHIP, we know that there is strong bi-partisan support for this program across the country. Further, we know that this support mirrors the opinions of the people who sit in our pews – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents – people of faith who believe that our children should be regarded as sacred gifts entrusted to our care, not as pawns in a game of partisan politics. We ask you to look beyond political ideology; to consider the teachings of your own faith tradition; to reclaim what you have believed about humans being created in the image of God; and to discern the best course of action based on those understandings.

2. We urge you to push for the strongest possible conference bill to cover more children and provide more of the services they need. We believe that ALL children should be afforded needed health care, and that comprehensive services are a part of that equation. As people of faith, we are reminded that the wholeness of our mind, body and spirit contribute to the overall well-being which God intends for us. Providing needed health care for our children confirms our role as partners in fulfilling Gods promises for them. At this moment we have the opportunity to set our sights on giving this generation of children the healthy start they need to move toward becoming healthy productive members of our society.

3. We urge you to reject any new interpretations of current SCHIP regulations, such as those recently mandated by the administration, that limit the states' flexibility to meet the needs of its children and their families. As Parish Nurses, we are on the front lines in addressing many health needs, including some of the health care services now up for debate. We do not see the feared movement from private to public insurance. We do not see members of the congregations which we serve wasting precious family resources so that they are not able to afford health insurance. We do not see people taking advantage of a free system. Instead, we see families struggling to make ends meet even at 300% of the poverty level as employers cut health care benefits, as out-of-pocket expenses lead to bankruptcy, and as pre-existing medical conditions make getting any kind of insurance impossible. As 50 people die prematurely every day because they cannot get needed health care (an average of one person per state per day!), we urge you to guarantee flexibility and encourage creativity as our state leaders address the needs unique to their needs.

What is at stake is not the money we may spend, but the moral compass of our country. It's a matter of how we choose to spend our abundant resources. It's a matter of deciding what we value as a nation. We urge you to make our children a national priority, and to reauthorize SCHIP with sufficient funding to cover as many children as possible. Until we as a nation agree that everyone should have needed health care, it is imperative that we at least get our children covered. It's very simply the right and moral thing to do.

As you deliberate in the coming days, we certainly will be in prayer for the children of our country, that they may be spared the pain and suffering that accompanies the lack of needed health care. We also will be praying for you, our elected leaders, that your deliberations and decisions might transcend partisan politics and reflect the moral vision of a nation that truly values all of our children.

Respectfully signed by:
The Rev. Dr. Deborah Patterson
Executive Director
International Parish Nurse Resource Center
475 East Lockwood Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63119
dpatterson@eden.edu