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TEAM MARYLAND HONORS MOTHER'S DAY WITH FIGHT FOR NEW, EXPECTING MOMS

Urges Administration to Save Maryland Healthy Start program

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senators Benjamin L. Cardin and Barbara A. Mikulski (Both D-MD) led Team Maryland colleagues Congressmen Steny H. Hoyer (D), Albert Wynn (D), Roscoe Bartlett (R), Elijah E. Cummings (D), C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger (D), Chris Van Hollen (D) and John Sarbanes (D) today in a fight for Maryland's Healthy Start program. Maryland has been waiting for more than two years for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to re-approve the program. Without CMS' approval, local health departments will be forced to fire the public health nurses who provide care to thousands of new mothers and newborns.

“For nearly 20 years, modest federal investment in the Maryland Healthy Start program has greatly improved prenatal and postnatal care for thousands of mothers and their infants and helped reduce the number of low birth weight babies and early infant deaths. The Administration should act immediately to ensure that access to these vital services can continue without interruption,” said **Senator Cardin**.

“CMS' failure to re-approve this program will deprive care to those who need it most. We must honor our new moms and children, not just with words, but with deeds,” said **Senator Mikulski**, Chair of the Maryland delegation. “As health care costs continue to rise, we must do everything we can to create solutions to help, not harm, those seeking and administering health and social services.”

“After two years of stonewalling, now is the time for CMS to grant approval for Maryland’s Healthy Start program,” stated **Congressman Hoyer**. “Failure to act is a decision to undermine critical medical services for low-income pregnant women and children, and will result in further weakening Maryland’s Medicaid program in the wake of harmful regulatory changes imposed by the Bush Administration.”

“It is essential that newborns get a healthy start in life. The Maryland Healthy Start Program ensures that our poorest mothers receive the critical prenatal care they need. During my tenure in Congress, I have fought to protect our most vulnerable citizens, women and children, and this program is something we can be proud of. I urge CMS to quickly approve the State’s request for this program,” said **Congressman Wynn**.

“The 50-50 cost share between the federal government and the State of Maryland for the Healthy Start program is a formula which should be continued by CMS,” said **Congressman Bartlett**. “Women who participated in Healthy Start are more than twice as likely as those who don’t participate to have earlier and better care and healthier outcomes for their babies.”

“It is critical that CMS act quickly in approving this request – not only for the numerous new and expectant mothers in our communities, but also for the nurses whose jobs rely on the survival of this program,” **Congressman Cummings** said. “As our economy continues to struggle with increasing job losses and the accompanying loss of health insurance, programs like Healthy Start become even more essential.”

“We must ensure that new moms and their children have access to quality health care so they can lead healthy and productive lives. We call on the Administration to fund Maryland’s Healthy Start program,” said **Congressman Ruppberger**.

“I am extremely disappointed that CMS has not given a final determination to the State of Maryland on its application to update the Medicaid Healthy Start Program. Unfortunately, this lack of a response from CMS is part of the Bush Administration’s efforts to shift Medicaid costs to the states and restrict services to needy individuals,” said **Congressman Van Hollen**. “I urge CMS to approve Maryland’s application for this very important program, which has been providing essential services to thousands of pregnant women and new mothers for 24 years.”

“Healthy Start is obviously vital to giving our children the care they need from the very beginning,” said **Congressman John Sarbanes**. “CMS must act promptly to avoid the needless interruption of these services.”

The delegation’s letter sent today to Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael O. Leavitt is below:

Dear Secretary Leavitt,

We are writing to request that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) approve the cost allocation plan for Maryland’s Medicaid Healthy Start program that the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) submitted in 2006.

The Maryland Healthy Start program has been providing valuable health services to Maryland's most vulnerable citizens for nearly two decades. These services are critical to the health of thousands of mothers and young children in the State of Maryland. Our State struggles with a high infant mortality rate and we must take every step possible to help these vulnerable individuals get the care that they need, both during the prenatal period and during the first years of the child's life.

We share the goal of eliminating money wasted through fraud and abuse; however, cutting this program is not the way to accomplish this. Facilitating Medicaid applications and linking women and children to appropriate care is essential for the efficient and effective administration of the Medicaid program, and therefore should be considered an appropriate Medicaid administrative cost. Without the services that Healthy Start nurses provide, many of the families this program serves would not be able to navigate the complex Medicaid application process or know how to access services. If we are not able to help those most in need to access services, we believe we are failing the objectives of the Medicaid program.

We urge CMS to quickly approve the cost allocation plan Maryland submitted for this important program. It is essential that the plan be approved before the local health departments are forced to fire the public health nurses who provide this essential service.

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