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Leading Oregon organizations urge Congress to enact children's health bill

(Oregon) – With funding for the popular State Children's Health Program (SCHIP) set to expire later this month, over three dozen organizations throughout Oregon today urged Congress to reauthorize the program in a manner that would ensure coverage to at least 10 million children.

In a public statement to Oregon's congressional delegation, 39 leading health, faith and community organizations described SCHIP as "resoundingly successful in covering tens of thousands of Oregon children from working families who lack employer-provided health insurance and cannot afford private coverage."

The statement comes as congressional leaders renew deliberations on a bill that would reauthorize SCHIP, currently set to expire on December 14. Although SCHIP enjoys broad bipartisan support, Congress so far has been unable to deliver a bill with enough House Republican votes to withstand a presidential veto.

In early October, President Bush vetoed a reauthorization bill that would have covered about 10 million children. An attempt to override the veto fell short by about a dozen votes in the House.

Both chambers of Congress subsequently passed a modified version of the bill covering the same number of children, but the House again failed to garner a veto-proof majority.

As the clock ticks, leaders of both parties have joined in negotiations with several dozen House Republicans to work out the terms of the next version of the bill in an effort to garner additional House Republican votes. The coalition of Oregon supporters of SCHIP urged lawmakers "to enact without delay" the legislation.

"It's essential that a bill that expands coverage for children in Oregon is successfully enacted," said Klaus Martin, President of the Oregon Medical Association, one of the signers of the statement. "Every day, physicians throughout the state see the harm suffered by children who lack regular access to health care. Not getting regular care undermines a child's long-term health prospects and results in larger costs to the system in the future."

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This view is echoed by Andy Davidson, president of the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems. "Far too often, hospital emergency rooms provide the only care available for uninsured children. By the time they come through our doors their conditions have already deteriorated," he said. "SCHIP provides access to primary care for so many of our children."

Over 100,000 Oregon children lack health insurance, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

"The number of uninsured children in Oregon is equal to more than half of all high school students in the state," said Janet Bauer, policy analyst for the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

The lack of health coverage is a growing crisis among Oregon's working families. According to U.S. Census data, nearly eight out of 10 uninsured children in Oregon live in households with a full-time worker.

The problem has worsened in recent years as a result of the decline in employment-based insurance. Nationwide, there are 3.4 million fewer children covered today by employment-based insurance than in the year 2000, according to a report issued last month by the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

"Working families are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place," said Bauer, noting that while fewer jobs now offer health benefits, the cost of private insurance is increasingly out of reach.

For the children of many of these families, hope lies in a strong SCHIP reauthorization bill, according to its backers.

"The Christian community has always considered care for the sick to be a primary social duty," said Courtney Dillard of the Oregon Center for Christian Values, a group consisting of mainline and evangelical Christians. "We are hopeful that Congress will be faithful to America's children and enact SCHIP."