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Health reform should leave no child uncovered

By Amy N. Swanson

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Ohio's children have a lot at stake in national health-care reform. But national reform can also take a lesson from Ohio on meeting kids' health needs.

Thanks to bipartisan cooperation in the General Assembly, Ohio has been very successful in covering uninsured children through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), public programs with a proven track record of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.

From 2004 until 2008, the share of Ohio children without insurance dropped by 25 percent. Once the state releases funds to cover children living in families with incomes up to \$66,000 (for a family of four, less for smaller families), we will reach 26,000 more Ohio children. This progress should be a model for the broader national health-care reform debate.

But more than 106,000 Ohio children are still uninsured, and untold hundreds of thousands more have private coverage with co-pays or deductibles so expensive their parents cannot afford to actually use it. Health reform offers a chance to ensure that these children can get the coverage — and the care — that meets their needs at a cost their parents can afford.

Congress should also seize health reform as an opportunity to strengthen the best features of CHIP and Medicaid and make them work even better by cutting the red tape. Too many Ohio children who are already eligible for Medicaid or CHIP remain uninsured because their parents do not know they qualify or because red tape prevents them from getting or staying covered.

Additionally, reform should identify the easiest, fastest and most cost-effective way to cover children from head to toe with coverage that meets their developmental needs. Kids especially need preventive services, medical care and oral and mental health care that helps them grow up healthy and strong. Medicaid and CHIP meet these needs through the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment Program, and we need to maintain it through health reform.

We have been promised that those who have a health plan they like can keep it; this should be as true for children enrolled in Ohio's Medicaid/State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) as it is for anyone else. Whatever the mechanisms, Congress must protect what works for kids even as it seeks to put insurance within the reach of their parents.

Unfortunately, leading health-reform proposals would eliminate CHIP, a highly successful and proven federal-state partnership that is a cornerstone of Ohio's success in covering uninsured children. There has been, however, some recent movement to preserve CHIP and Ohio's leaders should support that initiative.

In February of this year, Congress and President Obama made a substantial commitment to ensuring the health of our children when they enacted legislation to extend and strengthen the Children's Health Insurance Program. In July, Ohio leaders made an equally significant commitment to children when they preserved Medicaid/SCHIP in the face of the state's substantial budget deficit.

Together, our federal and state leaders have turned challenges into opportunities for real progress on covering uninsured children in Ohio. Health-care reform is another opportunity — if our leaders can meet the challenge of protecting the wins Ohio children have enjoyed through CHIP and Medicaid while delivering quality, affordable coverage for kids who have remained uninsured. This, of course, is no easy task. But with the health of our children at stake, it is a challenge our leaders must meet.

Swanson is the executive director of Voices for Ohio's Children.

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