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Children's insurance program could be axed

Jay trying to save popular program



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Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., listens as Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., makes a point as the Senate Finance Committee continued their markup on health-care legislation on Capitol Hill Wednesday.

By [Kate Long](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The Children's Health Insurance Program would be eliminated by the health care reform bills now before Congress. None of the bills provide a specific replacement for the popular program, according to national child advocacy groups.

"CHIP has been an enormously successful program, and it's not clear what would replace it," said Renate Pore, founder of the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition. "Everybody is very concerned about that."

Almost 25,000 West Virginia children now receive health care through CHIP. Families eligible for CHIP make too much to be eligible for Medicaid, but not enough to afford private insurance, Pore said. "These are working families," she said.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., has filed an amendment in the Senate Finance Committee to take CHIP off the chopping block. Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, co-sponsored the amendment.

"Millions of children would lose their insurance under this bill," Rockefeller said Thursday. "If we are going to promise people that, if they like their insurance they can keep it, that guarantee must apply to everyone, including children."

In West Virginia, 96 percent of children now have health insurance coverage, Pore said, one of the highest percentages in the nation. About half are covered by CHIP or Medicaid.

"Both programs have made a huge difference," Pore said. "Why would we trade them for something uncertain?"

"We should be using the CHIP program as a model, not eliminating it," said Delegate Don Perdue, chairman of the House of Delegates Health and Human Resources committee. If CHIP were dismantled, "it would be a terrific loss to the state," the Wayne County Democrat said.

The Senate bill was created by the "gang of six" Republicans and Democrats, led by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont.

Under the Senate bill, 14.1 million children nationwide would lose CHIP coverage in 2013. Theoretically, their parents would transfer them to a variety of other federally funded insurance plans, most offered by private insurance companies.

Under Senate and House bills, if a child eligible for CHIP ends up in an insurance plan that does not provide all the benefits CHIP now provides, the states must provide the missing benefits.

It is not clear how much of the cost of these missing benefits states would have to pay under the new proposal, said Michael Bird, chief lobbyist for the National Conference of State Legislatures. "Things are moving very fast," he said, "but it's safe to assume states will incur some cost."

Rockefeller has filed a second amendment that keeps CHIP alive through 2019. "By then, we should know what the other programs look like, so we wouldn't be putting millions of children into an uncertain situation," Pore said.

Rockefeller's amendment would also expand CHIP to include families that make up to 300 percent of the poverty level, which would cover many working families.

"Rather than creating massive dislocation of coverage for 14.1 million children in 2013, the amendment seeks to build upon what works," according to Rockefeller's amendment summary.

Two of the major House health care bills also eliminate CHIP. Under a third, the Energy and Commerce bill, CHIP cannot be eliminated unless health officials determine that children would not lose coverage.

The CHIP program covers a wide range of services, including doctor and hospital visits, immunizations and prescriptions, tests and X-rays, diabetic care, and dental and vision care. It provides care management for children with special needs and includes developmental screening and preventative care that is not part of most adult programs.

A family of four with income of \$33,075 or less can receive the coverage with co-payments for drugs only. A family of four with income up to \$55,125 can receive coverage with co-pays for all services.

"We'd be replacing a system geared to children and trying to fit them into a system geared to adults," said Jeff Allen, project director for the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition.

Parents can easily enroll children in CHIP, he said. "That's important, because parents are often working more than one job, and they have limited time. If we go to a more complicated system, we'll lose people."

"This will be a massive change involving 14 million children, and CHIP has been a very successful program, said Jocelyn Guyer, co-executive director of the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute. "It's quite risky from a political and policy level to dismantle something that works."

Rockefeller helped create the national CHIP program in 1997. He has filed 45 amendments to the Senate health care reform bill, including the CHIP amendment, watchdog amendments, and a provision that would let people between 55 and 64 buy into Medicare.

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