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First, the SCHIP expansion

A new president means improved health coverage for children

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The State Children's Health Insurance Program, which covers children in working families that earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, was an unlikely candidate for a protracted legislative battle. Yet in 2007, President Bush chose to lock horns with Congress over legislation that would have reauthorized and expanded the popular program. Twice, with bipartisan approval, Congress sent an SCHIP bill to the White House, and twice Bush vetoed the legislation, objecting to an expansion and the price tag.

Unable to override the veto, Congress settled for authorizing the program through March 31 this year — with funding merely to maintain coverage for the 6.6 million children already enrolled.

This week, with a new Congress in session and a new president about to take office, the U.S. House has made an expansion of the children's insurance program a top priority. The goal of the House leadership is to have a bill ready for Barack Obama to sign as soon as possible after inauguration.

It was inexcusable that the effort was stymied earlier. Then, the goal was to extend eligibility to higher-earning working families that still could not afford private coverage for their children. The projection was an additional 4 million uninsured children would gain access to health care.

It would be indefensible now to delay action any longer. The argument for a more robust program is stronger than it was barely 13 months ago when Congress and Bush kicked the problem down the road. As job losses mount in a period of deep recession, more workers are losing job-related health insurance. A recent report indicated that a 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate adds another 1 million or so people to the ranks of the insured, many of whom will be children.

The House essentially is reviving the legislation rejected in 2007. The bill sought an increase of \$35 billion for five years, on top of the \$5 billion a year the federal government was already spending, to ensure coverage for roughly 10 million children, the cost to be paid with an increase of 61 cents per pack in the federal tax on cigarettes. With the feds dishing out hundreds of billions to rescue financial institutions, the SCHIP program is an embarrassingly modest price to pay to protect the health of children.

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