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KENNEDY FIGHTS FOR HEALTH CARE FOR OUR NATION'S CHILDREN

(As Prepared for Delivery)

This week's broad bipartisan vote for children's health in the House of Representatives was a stunning rebuke for the President and the politics of fear. For months, the Administration had spared no effort to hold opposition to children's health care and even worked to increase it. They burned the phone lines with calls to members of the House, put pressure on governors to sway the Representatives from their states, and called in every last favor from their allies on K Street to try to bring this bill down.

Then, just as the House and Senate were beginning negotiations, the Administration even issued a directive from CMS that would further limit the income eligibility for CHIP and result in children across the country losing coverage.

All of this coming from a President, who, when running for office in 2004, the President said:

"America's children must also have a healthy start in life. In a new term, we will lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for the government's health insurance programs. We will not allow a lack of attention, or information, to stand between these children and the health care they need."

And for what result? Did opposition to the children's health bill grow, or even hold steady?

No – just the opposite.

38 members of the House of Representatives who had opposed the bill when it was first brought before that chamber supported it yesterday.

With each passing day, the President stands a little more isolated.

With each passing day, his arguments ring a little more hollow.

With each passing day, he reveals ever more clearly that the values of his Administration are out of touch with those of average Americans.

Americans overwhelmingly support investing more money into the CHIP program not less. Nine out of ten American want Congress to cover more uninsured children and the vast majority considers CHIP important. And 63% think that President

Bush would be doing the wrong thing if he vetoed the CHIP legislation. But the President has other priorities. And we can see what they are.

The senate bill provides \$35 billion over 5 years for CHIP. Just one year of the president's tax cuts is \$72.6 billion. And we spend \$120 billion on one year in Iraq.

Each day we spend \$333 million on Iraq. That's over 23 times what we currently spend on children needing health care every day. For one day in Iraq, we could cover the healthcare of over 256,000 American children. For one month in Iraq, we could cover the total cost of CHIP for over a year.

The children of America should not become the latest casualties of this Administration.

Some will point out that 25 more votes are needed in the other chamber to override a veto, and that is true. But something else is also true.

We have heard from many communities of faith, wondering why anyone could oppose legislation to bring good health care to children. They may differ in their creeds or in their form of worship, but they are united in one unshakeable foundation of faith: that we have a solemn duty to serve humankind, and to leave the world a better place than the one we found.

Yesterday, religious leaders from many different traditions of faith spoke out in favor of the children's health bill. Each of them comes from congregations or organizations that have a profound commitment to putting faith into action by caring for those in their community who are sick or who need help -- but each of these leaders recognizes that they cannot do the job alone. Government has a fundamental responsibility to provide the help that many cannot provide for themselves.

And CHIP helps us do that.

CHIP has grown steadily from the beginning and now provides coverage for over 6 million children.

In the past decade, the percentage of uninsured children has dropped from almost 23 percent in 1997 to 14 percent in 2005. That reduction is significant, but it's obviously far from enough.

Recently, the Census Bureau reported that in the past year 600,000 more children have become uninsured. The struggling economy is causing employers to drop family coverage and even the robust and successful CHIP program hasn't been able to stave off decreasing coverage for children.

CHIP helps to improve children's school performance. When children are receiving the health care they need, they do better academically, emotionally, physically and socially.

And CHIP all but eliminates the distressing racial and ethnic health disparities for the minority children who disproportionately depend on it for their coverage.

For specific diseases, like asthma, children on CHIP have dramatically better outcomes than when they were uninsured. Delays to the doctor and getting prescriptions decreased 27 percent. Emergency room visits decreased 19 percent. And hospitalizations decreased by almost two thirds.

Even the Administration's own studies confirm that CHIP works.

A report the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services released last week showed that over the past 10 years, CHIP has improved overall access to care, reduced the level of unmet need, improved access to dental care, expanded access to preventative care, and reduced emergency department use.

Supporters of CHIP know that a healthy work force is a productive work force, and when parents have to take time away from work to tend to a sick child or for sudden visits to the emergency room because they cannot get care elsewhere, the business of America suffers.

Supporters of CHIP know that it allows more of their students to come to class ready to learn and ready to contribute.

Supporters of CHIP know what a difference it makes in the lives of the children in their care. They know that too many families are one layoff, one off-shoring or one employer's decisions away from losing the coverage they have for themselves and their children.

Supporters of CHIP know that it makes the difference between a life of opportunity and good health, and one of denial and illness. CHIP changes lives.

We must pass this bill and show our commitment to the children and working families of America. This bill moves us forward together, Republicans and Democrats alike, to guarantee the children of America the health care they need and deserve.

It is incomprehensible that President Bush has continued to issue a cruel veto threat on the bill. The question for President Bush today is why he would even consider rejecting a program that has long brought Republicans and Democrats together to help children.

The President says he will veto the bill because CHIP is just a step towards "socialized medicine" but that's untrue. CHIP allows parents to choose insurance for their son or daughter from a private insurance company. That is one reason why Republicans have long supported the CHIP program. Indeed, CHIP uses the same private

insurance model that President Bush supported in creating the Medicare prescription drug benefit.

If Members of Congress and the Administration really feel strongly that it's wrong for the federal government to support health care coverage, maybe they should start by giving up their own taxpayer-subsidized health care through the federal employees' program. If members can take their children to the attending physician of the Senate with all the benefits that affords—shouldn't all American children also have access to quality healthcare? The American people pay 72% of our health care premiums. I would hope that my Senate colleagues—Republican and Democrat alike—believe that the children of hard working American families deserve a healthy start in life—the same start our own children had. The people that pay for our health coverage with their tax dollars should at least be able to take their children to the doctor when they are sick.

The President says he will veto the bill because it costs too much. But I will tell you what costs more: treating children in emergency rooms after their conditions have become severe. CHIP saves money -- and untold suffering -- by getting health care to our nation's children before they are seriously ill.

This bill is paid for by an increased tax on cigarettes -- not by raiding the treasury. That tax will itself save us countless dollars and lives by discouraging smoking.

This bill does what is needed to cover 4 million more uninsured children. Experts, including those at the Congressional Budget office, say that this bill is the most cost effective way to cover uninsured children. But under the President's proposal, 1.4 million children would lose their coverage because it is \$8 billion short of what is needed to cover the children currently covered by CHIP.

The words of parents whose children are enrolled by CHIP are more eloquent than any Senator could be on how important CHIP is.

In Massachusetts, I met a woman named Dedra Lewis. Her daughter Alexsiana developed an eye disease that if left untreated would make her go blind. Because of our state CHIP program Masshealth, Dedra is able to get the medicine and doctor visits needed to prevent her daughter's blindness.

Dedra said this:

“If I miss a single appointment, I know she could lose her eyesight. If I can't buy her medication, I know she could lose her eyesight. If I didn't have Masshealth, my daughter would be blind.”

This is the tremendous impact CHIP has on families across America.

The President has broken his promise to America's children. We must not break ours. I urge my colleagues to support this motion.

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