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Boosting Health Care Coverage for Children

The House has approved bipartisan legislation to provide health care to 11 million uninsured children across the country, and it is likely one of the first bills President Barack Obama will sign into law.

The Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) Reauthorization Act provides funding through FY 2013, and will help to ensure that 136,000 additional children in North Carolina will have health insurance under the Healthy Choice program. Currently, more than 240,000 children in North Carolina are covered under program.

The State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) was created in 1997 to provide health care coverage for children in families that earn too little to afford health insurance for their children themselves but too much to qualify for Medicaid. This legislation provides states the resources and incentives necessary to reach and cover millions of uninsured children who are currently eligible for, but not enrolled in, SCHIP and Medicaid.

The program was due to be reauthorized in 2007, and Congress twice passed legislation with bipartisan support that year to expand the program to cover more uninsured children. Unfortunately, President Bush vetoed the bills on both occasions.

Since then, the program has operated under a temporary extension that maintained level funding with a small increase to cover enrollment increases. Quickly passing the bill was important because that extension expires on March 31, 2009.

- In This Week’s Issue:
- Boosting Health Care for Children
 - Concerns about Digital TV Conversion
 - Climate Change
 - Importance of Weatherization

During these tough economic times, it is essential that we ensure that children will have access to health care coverage.

Concerns about Digital TV Conversion

I have urged the Federal Communications Commission to delay the digital television conversion because so many North Carolinians stand to be left in the dark.

With the digital television conversion date looming just a month away it is clear that too many people across the country are unprepared and would be left in the dark. Simply delaying the conversion would provide the time needed to ensure a smooth transition. I wrote to the FCC to urge a delay in the transition from analog to digital television broadcasting out of concern that millions of Americans could be without a television signal on February 17, 2009.

Currently, television stations across the country are scheduled to stop sending analog signals on February 17, 2009. At that point, television stations are expected to only broadcast over-the-air programming in the digital spectrum. While cable and satellite subscribers will not be affected, people who use antennas to receive a signal will need a digital tuner.

To ease the transition, Congress funded a Converter Box Coupon Program that provides up to two \$40 coupons to offset the purchase of digital-to-analog converter boxes. Unfortunately, the fund was exhausted on January 4, 2009 and people are experiencing delays in receiving the coupons of up to eight weeks.

The coupon waiting list stands at more than 2.1 million requests, representing more than 3 million people and 1.2 million households across the country. Given eastern North Carolina’s rural nature, it is likely that that thousands of residents would be in jeopardy of losing television service without a deadline delay.

Given the circumstances and vulnerabilities, the transition date must be extended.

I was recently named to the House Energy and Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet which has jurisdiction over this issue. The subcommittee may consider a legislative solution if the FCC fails to delay transition. I also expect the subcommittee to consider legislation that would provide the funding needed for the Converter Box Coupon Program.

Climate Change

House leaders have made climate change a priority for the 111th Congress and the first hearing of was held by the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The hearing included a discussion with the U. S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), which is a coalition of over 30 business and nongovernmental organizations including General Electric, Duke Energy and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The discussion centered on USCAP’s just-released “Blueprint for Legislative Action,” which details consensus recommendations for climate change policy. Witnesses included chief executives from several of the USCAP member organizations who discussed why their organizations joined in USCAP’s call for legislative action on climate change and what such actions would mean to their companies or organizations.

During the hearing I made the following opening statements:

We have a historic opportunity in this Congress and in this Committee to revolutionize our energy and environmental policy. Accomplishing the monumental task of passing and implementing energy reform demands bipartisanship in Congress and cooperation between the actors involved in the crafting of this policy, which certainly includes our witnesses today from USCAP.

Transformation of our attitude to one of cooperation in recognition of a common problem is sorely needed not only to combat the climate change crisis, but to mobilize every sector of our society to participate in the process to make us more economically and environmentally secure.

It is our responsibility to confront these issues aggressively but prudently, recognizing that in our policy, there will be winners and losers. The poorest among us, those who are least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, will be the losers in nearly any iteration of policy that puts a price on carbon.

When crafting our policy to curb emissions, we must mitigate the rising cost of energy on America’s poor, who contributed the least to the problem and can least afford to bear the weight of a costly solution. I thank USCAP for their efforts to find consensus amongst diverse actors, and eagerly anticipate the opportunity we have in the coming months to effect change.

Importance of Weatherization

As we look ahead to the challenges of global warming and a deeply troubled economy, something as simple as weatherization can and should play a role in solving these complex problems.

Easy and low-cost solutions like adding insulation, replacing air filters, fixing leaking air ducts and stopping unwanted air flowing into homes from the outdoors can cut a household’s heating and cooling costs by up to 30 percent - or as much as \$1,000 annually in some cases.

About 140,000 low-income homes were weatherized with public support last year, and President Barack Obama has pledged to raise that total to one million homes. I strongly support this goal because in addition to greatly reducing energy consumption, cutting energy costs and lowering greenhouse gas emissions, increased weatherization would create a substantial number of new jobs.

Much of this effort is done through the U.S. Department of Energy’s Weatherization Assistance Program, which provides states with funding to inspect and weatherize low-income homes. With an expenditure limit of about \$3,055, the improvements are not costly, but they are highly effective and usually pay for themselves within just a few years.

Since the Weatherization Assistance Program began in 1976, more than 5.6 million homes have been weatherized across the country. Last year, about 3,000 homes in North Carolina were weatherized through this program.

The Department of Energy estimates that the current effort to weatherize low-income homes directly provides about 8,000 jobs as well as thousands more indirectly. It is projected that weatherizing a million homes annually would directly create 78,000 jobs at a great variety of skill levels.

Congress demonstrated its commitment to weatherization with a \$250 million boost for the Department of Energy’s Weatherization Assistance Program, but a much greater investment would still be required to reach the goal of a million homes.

Weatherization offers an immense and immediate opportunity to create needed jobs, lower energy costs for low-income families and cut energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Should Congress move forward with an economic stimulus package, I strongly support including funds for weatherization.

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