

Op-Ed from Wyoming Children's Action Alliance and the Equality State Policy Center

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Contacts listed below

Opponents of children's health care take sharp turn off Main Street

At recent town hall meetings, U.S. Senator John Barrasso shared an amusing anecdote from his experience as a neophyte in Washington, D.C. A shiny red limousine pulled up and, thinking it was his ride, Sen. Barrasso hopped in. He related surprise and disappointment upon being evicted, learning that it was Sen. Rockefeller's limo.

Less glamorously but more realistically, Sen. Barrasso has been given the opportunity to test drive a government vehicle for several months while voters evaluate whether to extend his lease for another six-year term.

Wyomingites are watching to see if Sens. Barrasso and Enzi and Congresswoman Cubin have seats for children in their leased government vehicles. Are Wyoming's children safely buckled in and heading toward hope and opportunity, or have they been left by the side of the road?

The recent vote on the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) reauthorization provided a glimpse into Wyoming politicians' leased vehicles. Despite the 6,000 eligible but unenrolled children in our own state, Wyoming's delegation unanimously opposed the reauthorization of this critical children's health care program.

Wyoming Kid Care CHIP is a public/private partnership between the Department of Health, Blue Cross Blue Shield and Delta Dental of Wyoming. Private physicians, dentists, and other health professionals opt whether to provide services to those who are enrolled in the program.

Wyoming Kid Care CHIP covers children in families earning wages between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level. These families earn less than a self-sufficiency level income and do not have enough money to buy private health insurance. A Wyoming family of four must have an income approximately twice the poverty level (\$41,300) to reach self-sufficiency – the capacity to reliably cover basic economic necessities, including health insurance. In Teton County, the self-sufficiency standard is more than \$13,000 above 200% poverty, or \$54,644 for a family of four, making it difficult for even higher income families to buy private health insurance.

The annualized cost of private health insurance coverage for a family of four with a \$500 deductible is approximately \$7,500. That is a high hurdle for a family of four making between \$20,650 and \$41,300 annually.

The importance of the CHIP program becomes plain when we all understand the economic reality that lower income people face. For example, in 2005, 43% of Wyoming children eligible for the Medicaid and Kid Care CHIP programs lived in households that used about one-third — or more — of their income just to pay for housing. Adding up these most basic living expenses makes clear why Kid Care CHIP is critical for children and families, and for sustaining economic prosperity at the community level.

Wyoming Kid Care CHIP helps keep health care costs down for everyone. Without it, families would be forced to seek care for their children in emergency rooms, and would let minor, inexpensive health problems become major, expensive ones. Health care advocates agree that state CHIP programs provide more bang for the buck than almost anything else.

More than 5,800 Wyoming children depend on Kid Care CHIP for health care, but with 6,000 children in

the state who are eligible but uninsured, much work remains to be done.

The SCHIP reauthorization bill (H.R. 976) is supported by business interests, the health insurance industry, children's and disease-control advocates, 43 of the nation's governors including Wyoming's, the AARP, and the American Medical Association. A recent Washington Post/ABC news poll found 72% of those surveyed support an increase in spending on the program, with 25% opposed.

Senators Enzi and Barrasso voted against reauthorizing the children's health insurance program, although it passed the Senate with bipartisan support, 67 to 29. The measure also passed the House of Representatives on a vote of 265-159; Congresswoman Cubin missed the vote, but has stated her opposition. President Bush's veto has thrown the program into limbo and set the stage for a drawn-out political battle; meanwhile, children's health care will suffer.

If Wyoming's legislators didn't like the common sense compromise bill to reauthorize children's health insurance, what is the alternative? President Bush has proposed reauthorizing SCHIP for five years with an additional \$5 billion in funding, a level insufficient to maintain all the children currently covered by SCHIP, much less those eligible but not yet enrolled. That's no solution at all.

With more than 9 million uninsured children in America – and approximately 14,000 here in Wyoming - we expect our elected representatives to deal with the problem and to act in the best interests of children.

In their staunch opposition to reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program, Wyoming's congressional delegation has steered off Main Street, leaving Wyoming kids by the side of the road.

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