

Catholic leaders find president's health care proposals disappointing

WASHINGTON - Calling the failure to provide health insurance for every child in the nation "a glaring moral failure," the president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association said President George W. Bush's opposition to the expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program was "profoundly" disappointing.

Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity, said the proposal outlined by the president in a June 27 address at the White House "would actually take coverage away from children currently enrolled in the program by providing insufficient funds."

"Yesterday the president also promoted health savings accounts and association health plans, which fall short of addressing the severe weaknesses of our health care system," Sister Carol said in a June 28 news release. "Most importantly, his proposals would do little to expand coverage to low- and middle-income families who cannot afford monthly premiums or wait for the end-of-the-year tax deduction to help finance their health care."

Candy Hill, vice president for social policy and government affairs at Catholic Charities USA, told Catholic News Service June 29 that her organization also was "disappointed that the president seems to be walking away from his commitment" to provide health insurance for all children.

"SCHIP is one of those success stories" that should be promoted rather than face budget cuts, she said.

In his address, Bush said he opposed the "massive expansion of government health care" contained in some proposals for reauthorization of SCHIP. "Their goal is to take incremental steps down the path to government-run health care for every American," he said.

"It's the wrong path for our nation," the president added. "It would cause huge increases in government spending, which could lead to higher taxes. It would result

in rationing, inefficiency and long waiting lines. It would replace the doctor-patient relationship with dependency on people here in Washington, D.C.”

Bush proposed tax reform that would provide a standard deduction of \$15,000 for families or \$7,500 for individuals with private health insurance to “level the playing field” between those with private health insurance through their employers and those who purchase health insurance on their own. The plan also would make the cost of employer-provided health insurance taxable income.

Earlier in June, Sister Carol joined with Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Domestic Policy, and Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, in a letter to Senate Finance Committee members urging funding for SCHIP that would “both maintain coverage for those currently in SCHIP and allow states to enroll the almost 6 million uninsured children who are eligible for SCHIP or Medicaid.”

“We believe that health care should be available to all, regardless of their country of origin, and strongly support ending the five-year waiting period for legal immigrants to be eligible for benefits under Medicaid and SCHIP,” the three leaders added.

At a White House briefing following the president’s address, Michael O. Leavitt, secretary of Health and Human Services, said current proposals to expand SCHIP “would increase those who are eligible from 200 percent of the federal poverty level to nearly twice that, which would mean that families making over \$81,000 a year would have children eligible for public assistance.”

Desmond Brown, director of health and welfare policy for Catholic Charities USA, told CNS June 29 that some states have raised eligibility levels for SCHIP above 200 percent of the poverty level – or about \$40,000 for a family of four – because of the high cost of living in those states.

If all states were required to limit eligibility to those under 200 percent of poverty, as the Bush administration proposes, children in 14 to 18 states would lose their health insurance, Brown said. But he said it is erroneous to “imply that every state is at 400 percent of poverty,” adding that “not more than two,” if any, are at that level.

Leavitt also indicated that the administration would be unlikely to support a tobacco tax to fund expanded children's health coverage.

A recent nationwide survey found that large majorities of Americans – regardless of their age, gender, race, party affiliation or socioeconomic status – support a 75-cent-per-pack increase in the federal tobacco tax to fund health care coverage for the nation's uninsured children.