

Children must get health care

WASHINGTON - Among four U.S. senators in Washington, there was optimistic talk of a bipartisan commitment to expand health coverage for the nation's 9 million uninsured children. But 40 miles away at a Catholic hospital in Baltimore, there was more nitty-gritty talk of getting children into state and federal health programs - and keeping them there.

Both events were part of a national town hall meeting on children's health care, broadcast by satellite to 34 hospitals across the country Jan. 11. National sponsors of the meeting included the Catholic Health Association and the Campaign for Children's Health Care, whose partners include Catholic Health Initiatives and Network, a national Catholic social justice lobby.

"We're the only industrialized nation that doesn't cover all its children," said Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is CHA president and CEO, in a panel discussion during the broadcast.

She finds that situation perplexing, adding, "We love our children as much as any other nation."

Universal coverage of children also would be good for society. Studies have found that children who receive regular health care are less likely to miss school and do better in school and in life.

According to the four senators who spoke at the town hall meeting, prospects are bright for the reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, and possibly for expansion of the joint state-federal Medicaid health program to cover more children of the working poor.

Although SCHIP has brought health coverage to an estimated 6 million U.S. children since it began 10 years ago and another 28 million children are enrolled in Medicaid, more than 9 million remain uninsured. Nearly three-fourths of those 9 million are eligible for Medicaid and/or SCHIP but not enrolled, according to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured.

At St. Agnes Hospital in Baltimore, a group of hospital officials, political aides, medical professionals and others who watched the national town hall presentation shared their day-to-day struggles with keeping Maryland children healthy and brainstormed about ways to bring more children into the programs.

Kathleen Westcoat, president of Baltimore HealthCare Access, the lead outreach and eligibility determination agency in Baltimore City for the Maryland Children's Health Program, said efforts to enroll more children have been hurt by a new federal requirement that applicants - and those seeking renewal - prove both their U.S. citizenship and their identity.

The requirement has led to such absurdities as "sending an infant to the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) to get an identity card," Ms. Westcoat said.

Back in Washington, Sen. John D. "Jay" Rockefeller IV, D-W.Va., said SCHIP developed "in the most ideal circumstances, which all of us here yearn for - a totally bipartisan atmosphere."

Sen. Rockefeller would like to see a major expansion of health coverage for children. His MediKids proposal, which he admitted "has gotten absolutely nowhere" since it was first introduced in 2001, would enroll every child in Medicaid at birth and automatically cover them through college.

Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, R-Utah, an original co-sponsor of the legislation that created SCHIP, said the effort to help uninsured children brought together a divided Congress back in 1997 and was "the glue that helped pass the first balanced budget in 40 years."

Sen. Hatch said the first priority must be on outreach to all eligible children not yet enrolled in Medicaid or SCHIP. "We must take care of these children," he said, to make the United States "the compassionate, caring, giving country we all want it to be."

"I think the passion is still there" for ensuring health coverage for every child, said Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the new chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He pledged to begin hearings on SCHIP reauthorization within "the next few weeks"

and to bring the issue to the floor of the Senate “by the spring.”

Sen. Gordon H. Smith, R-Ore., noted that he and eight other Republican senators wrote to President George W. Bush late last year asking that his fiscal 2008 budget – due out Feb. 5 – ensure “adequate federal funding for states to both maintain their existing SCHIP caseloads and for states to cover all children and pregnant women up to 200 percent of the federal poverty line.”

The 2006 poverty guidelines of the Department of Health and Human Services say a family of four living in the 48 contiguous U.S. states and making \$20,000 a year or less is living in poverty. The levels are higher in Alaska and Hawaii. The 2007 guidelines were due out by the end of January.

Whatever Congress does this year, political pundits seem to agree that health care will be a crucial issue in the 2008 election.

“I promise that in 2008, (health care) will be the biggest issue in the election,” said Terry McAuliffe, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, at a forum in Washington late last year sponsored by Ceasefire on Health Care, an organization seeking to find common ground on health care.

And Ed Gillespie, former head of the Republican National Committee, agreed, calling health care “the defining domestic policy debate in the 2008 presidential campaign.”