

WASHINGTON, DC – With overwhelming bipartisan support, the House today passed a major children’s health care bill that will insure more than ten million children under the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The legislation preserves coverage for the 6.6 million currently covered by the program and extends coverage to 3.8 million children who are currently uninsured, including up to 65,500 in the State of Maryland. The bill also includes a guaranteed dental benefit championed by Congressman Steny H. Hoyer and members of the Maryland Congressional Delegation. The Senate is expected to pass the legislation on Thursday.

“It is absolutely unconscionable and indeed immoral that in the richest nation in the world, millions of children are without health care,” stated Rep. Hoyer. “This critical legislation will go a long way to invest in the health of our children and is a significant step forward in reducing the ranks of the uninsured among our most vulnerable citizens.”

The legislation will also provide a guaranteed dental benefit for all children enrolled in the program. Rep. Hoyer touted the efforts of the Maryland Delegation – mobilized by the tragic death of twelve-year old Prince George’s County resident Deamonte Driver who died after a tooth infection spread to his brain – to ensure the dental guarantee was included in the final bill.

Stated Rep. Hoyer, “The grim reality is that for many low-income families like Deamonte’s, children’s dental care is out of reach. It is because of the passionate and tireless effort of our Maryland Delegation, and in particular Senator Ben Cardin and Congressmen Cummings and Wynn, that the guaranteed dental benefit is in this bill.”

“Today we have reached another great milestone in ensuring that the death of Deamonte Driver was not in vain,” Congressman Elijah E. Cummings said. “There are millions of Deamontes across the country who will benefit from the inclusion of dental benefits in the CHIP reauthorization.”

Congressman Wynn said, “While I am disappointed that the final bill will not cover as many children as the initial House bill called for, I am pleased that the agreement includes a guaranteed dental benefit for children. As we have seen in the wake of the Deamonte Driver tragedy, this is particularly important in the State of Maryland. I am also glad that this bill includes the provision ensuring mental health parity. We must continue to work hard to expand health care coverage under SCHIP to provide coverage to all uninsured American children.”

Despite the fact that the bill has significant bipartisan support, enjoys the backing of most health advocacy and insurance groups, has been endorsed by the editorial boards of several newspapers, and -according to recent polling - has the support of more than 80 percent of the American people, the President has stubbornly refused to budge on his threat to veto the bill and deny millions of children coverage. Rep. Hoyer, who spoke at a press conference today with Congressional leaders, has repeatedly called upon the President to join the Congress in approving this critical children's health care bill.

"President Bush made a campaign promise to 'lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for the government's health insurance programs,'" stated Hoyer, referencing a speech the President made at the 2004 Republican National Convention. "The question before the President really comes down to this: Will you stand with American children who through no fault of their own are uninsured, or will you go back on your own campaign promise and deny them coverage."

Since it was enacted in 1997, the Children's Health Insurance Program has enabled millions of uninsured children across the nation to receive the medical care they need by providing coverage to children whose parents do not qualify for Medicaid, but can't afford private insurance. In 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, there were 120,316 children in Maryland enrolled in the State's Children's Health Insurance Program. Despite its success, the program currently lacks the resources to fulfill its goal, leaving more than 6 million eligible children nationwide uninsured.

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