

A Haunted Birthday

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By Jim Carnes

I recently came across some pictures of an April birthday party. You can't tell from the smiles and banners, but it struck me, looking back, that the party was haunted. When ALL Kids, Alabama's State Children's Health Insurance Program (or SCHIP), marked its 10th anniversary last spring with a grand celebration on the capitol steps, an unwelcome guest hovered in the shadows, unseen by many people there. Now that specter is in the spotlight.

The 10-year milestone signals the end of Congress's original authorization of the federal-state SCHIP partnership, which covers children in low-income families that don't qualify for Medicaid. (Unlike Medicaid, SCHIP requires parents to pay premiums on a sliding scale based on their income.) All of the success we cheered that day will come to naught if lawmakers fail to reauthorize SCHIP:

- It won't matter that ALL Kids was the first SCHIP in the nation to win federal approval.
- It won't matter that Alabama has reduced its ranks of uninsured children from an estimated 15 percent in 1996 to just over 6 percent today – guaranteeing doctor visits, vision and dental care, and hospital coverage for thousands of children who would otherwise go without.
- It won't matter that careful stewardship of SCHIP resources has allowed Alabama to carry over a portion of our federal funding from year to year, buffering the program against uncertainties of enrollment, policy change and economic trends.
- It won't matter that ALL Kids enrollment is growing at a record rate, which means our safety net is working as plants close, wages stagnate and health care costs soar.

These things won't matter, because without reauthorization, ALL Kids will simply shut down.

As state officials, agency staff and children's advocates joined parents and schoolchildren to sing "Happy Birthday, dear ALL Kids" that sunny day, President Bush and Congress were gearing up for a fight. The President's February budget proposal for SCHIP fell short of projected costs for the current program, thus spelling severe cuts. The bipartisan bill that Congress passed this summer (with U.S. Reps. Bud Cramer and Artur Davis casting Alabama's only affirmative votes) offered significant increases but immediately drew the promise of a veto.

On Sept. 30, the final day of the first SCHIP decade, that promise came true. A continuing resolution, passed by both houses, allows the state programs to run at "level funding" through Nov. 15 – six weeks of borrowed time.

Next Thursday, Congress will attempt to override the President's veto and pass the compromise bill. The Senate measure will come through, but the votes are still short in the House, by about 15 at last

count. The stakes could hardly be higher. If the override effort fails, attempts to break the stalemate will continue. But with reauthorization on hold, level funding will force a number of states to begin dropping children from their rolls.

Alabama's cushion of federal carryover will delay that grim prospect, but not for long. If the November deadline passes and Congress extends current funding to the end of the year, ALL Kids will have to begin reducing enrollment through attrition – by refusing to enroll new children as others reach the age limit of 19 or drop out for other reasons.

Arise has praised Gov. Bob Riley for the bold message he sent to our congressional delegation this summer about the vital role of SCHIP. His words shine a well-deserved spotlight on a program that has done as much as any other to dispel negative stereotypes about our great state. We urge our U.S. senators and representatives to follow Riley's lead in championing low-cost, comprehensive health coverage for Alabama's children – including new funding to reach more of the 75,000 children not yet covered.

The 10th birthday of ALL Kids is a time for celebration, not fear. It's time to drive away the ghosts of level funding, enrollment attrition and – scariest of all – expiration. Whatever the immediate outcome next week, the tug-of-war between the White House and Congress is raising public awareness about a critical component of our nation's health care system and expanding the already broad alliance of SCHIP supporters. With the election year upon us, the pressure to strengthen the safety net for low-income working families is sure to grow.

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