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KENNEDY DELIVERS HEALTH CARE ADDRESS AT FAMILIESUSA 7th ANNUAL HEALTH ACTION CONFERENCE

KENNEDY DISCUSSED THE NEED TO REAUTHORIZE CHIP PROGRAM TO INSURE MORE OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN

Washington, D.C. – Today, Senator Edward M. Kennedy addressed over 500 grassroots health advocates from across the country at the 7th Annual Health Action Conference. Senator Kennedy spoke about the history of the Children's Health Insurance Program—which he authored the legislation for—and the critical importance of making its reauthorization a priority for the 110th Congress.

The CHIP program, which will expire in 2007 unless it is reauthorized by Congress, has gone a long way towards reducing the number of uninsured children in America. However, millions of children still don't have access to health care or the services for which they are eligible. Senator Kennedy is determined to make sure that this critical program covers even more of America's children.

REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY FAMILIES USA JANUARY 26, 2007

Thank you, Ron Pollack, for that generous introduction. Your skillful leadership, and your commitment to quality health care has made such a difference in countless debates on this important issue in Congress and across the country. Today, you're making progress through the "strange bedfellows" coalition- just the kind of bipartisan effort we need to help break the logjam and deal responsibly with the health care crisis that's such a serious ongoing challenge to the nation.

Families USA is an extraordinary organization that has been an inspiration to me and many others for many years. Everyone at this conference has devoted their energy and their spirit to one basic idea B that the promise of America belongs to every American and every family.

Year after year, we've seen that promise delayed and denied. When I leave, I will go back to the fight to raise the minimum wage so that hard-working Americans can live with dignity and security. Yet even this obvious advance has been blocked and stalled again and again in recent years.

After six long years of the most rubber-stamp Congress in my memory, I have this to say.

"Democrats are back and we're going to make some changes around here!"

We have a huge amount of work to do, and we need your help to get it done.

Earlier this week, the President came out with a health plan that hands out even greater benefits to the wealthy, does nothing to improve access to coverage, and undermines the health care safety net in order to give block grants to the states. That's the wrong approach. It doesn't support the bipartisan reforms that states like Massachusetts have undertaken: it undermines them.

The right approach is to make sure that every American can have the same kind of guaranteed coverage that their Congressman, their Senator and their President enjoys.

The place we need to start is CHIP, the Children's Health Insurance Program that provides quality care for children in every state. In its first year, CHIP enrolled nearly a million children, and enrollment has grown ever since. Average monthly enrollment is now 4 million, and over 6 million have been enrolled for at least part of the year.

It's had a dramatic effect on coverage for children. Over the last decade, the percentage of uninsured children has dropped from 22 percent in 1997 to 13 percent today. And that's in spite of the fact that more and more of their parents have been losing coverage because employers decide to reduce it or drop it entirely.

We know CHIP has made a difference in the lives of millions of children, but we also know that this is no time to rest on past success, because CHIP faces a severe and growing budget shortfall that will affect more and more states.

During the first years of the program, funds available to the states exceeded the need, but this situation is now the reverse. The budget we inherited from the Republican Congress assumes that CHIP funding will remain flat at about \$5 billion a year. Even assuming only modest growth in the program's expenses, it would need \$2 billion a year more than that, just to hold its own over the next five years. We'll no longer have the safety valve of reallocating unspent funds from state to state, since more and more states will use up all their funds.

The effect of this shortfall will be felt across the nation. More and more states will have to cut back their services. 17 States will face shortfalls this year. Next it will be 23. And by 2012, 36 states will have needs greater than the available funds, and millions more children will be left out again. We can't let that happen.

We put a Band-Aid on the problem last year. After months of stalling by some in Congress, we obtained \$271 million in urgently needed funds for CHIP.

Band-Aids are necessary to stop the bleeding B but they don't fix the problem. That's why I'm joining Senator Rockefeller and Senator Snowe in introducing legislation to provide the funds we need to avoid the shortfall that will hit the states this year.

Passing that bill will be a good first step, but the greater challenge is to revitalize and strengthen CHIP so it fulfills its promise to cover all eligible children.

We know that 9 million children in America today don't have health coverage. Two thirds of them <6 million are eligible for CHIP or Medicaid but aren't enrolled because of bureaucratic barriers, or because states have cut back their enrollment efforts due to lack of funds.

Think about that number: 9 million children in the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. 9 million children whose only family doctor is the hospital emergency room. 9 million children at risk of blighted lives because of illnesses that could easily have been treated if they had a regular source of care.

9 million uninsured children in America isn't just wrong B it's outrageous, and we need to change it. We need to start right now B not next year, not next month, but now.

We know where the Bush Administration stands. We'll see their actual budget in a few weeks. It won't cover all children. It won't cover the children eligible for CHIP but who aren't enrolled. It won't even cover all the children in the program.

We can't rely on the Administration to do the right thing. Congress has to step up to the plate. We're fortunate to have champions like John Dingell, Jay Rockefeller, Olympia Snowe, and other colleagues who are ready to meet the challenge. In fact, there has been no greater champion of CHIP across the nation than my colleague Orrin Hatch. His commitment is as unwavering today as it was a decade ago when we worked together to create the program.

Our goal is to expand this needed program, improve its outreach, and make good health a reality for every child in America.

But we can't get it down without all of you as well.

You can persuade every newspaper in the country to run stories about the children who don't have health care B and to keep running them until we correct the problem.

You have to let every governor, every state representative, and every local mayor know that they should be calling Washington now, and keep right on calling until every child has decent health care.

And most of all, you have to make your voices heard by every Senator and every Representative on Capitol Hill.

You have to let them know that making sure the nation's children have quality health care isn't just an option or a nice idea. It's not just something we wish we could do.

It's something we have to do. It's an obligation and it's a clarion call to action.

So, let me close by asking you this.

Are you ready for this battle?

Are you ready to fight for working families?

Are you ready to fight at long last to make health care a right for every American child?

We're on the way. Thank you, FamiliesUSA, for all you do so well.