

## Powerless children need powerful voices

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In his inaugural address in 2001, President Bush said, "In the quiet of the American conscience, we know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise. And whatever our views of its causes, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault. Where there is suffering, there is duty."

In Alabama, we witness the struggles of those in poverty firsthand and see its devastating effects on children's lives. As the president stated in his inaugural address, we have a call to duty to protect these children, who cannot protect themselves.

However, recently, Bush and his allies in Congress abandoned their duty to the nation's children by opposing the reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which covers children in low-income families who don't qualify for Medicaid. The inspiring words of a speech are meaningless to the millions of children whose families can't afford for them to see a doctor when they are sick or receive medication to prevent a disease.

Although there was bipartisan support of the SCHIP reauthorization bill, which would have provided health coverage for 10 million low-income children, Alabama's delegation voted along party lines, with all Republicans upholding Bush's veto.

This vote could mean that Alabama's program, known as ALL-Kids, would either have to freeze new enrollments or drop from the program some children currently covered because of rising costs. Had the legislation passed, it would have allowed coverage of another 12,000 to 15,000 eligible children in Alabama.

The opponents of the legislation who sided with Bush have made claims which, in fact, are myths.

The truth is the SCHIP bill would increase federal health care spending by only seven-tenths of 1 percent, hardly a massive expansion. Claims have also been

made the legislation is a move toward eliminating private health care. Yet, the vast majority of children covered by SCHIP programs receive health care through private health plans and obtain care from private programs.

There has also been controversy that the legislation covers children who are not "really poor." What child is "not poor enough" to deserve to be able to see a doctor when he is sick? What child should not have preventive medical and dental care because her family's income from their jobs with employers that don't offer health insurance is "a little too much?"

The vetoed bill would allow coverage of unborn children. With our nation's, and Alabama's, high infant mortality rate and increasing rate of low weight births, access to critical prenatal care for women not poor enough to receive Medicaid would mean a healthier start in life for many children. The rest of us would benefit from reduced health care costs for those children later in life. Which child's mother is "not poor enough" to have care that leads to a healthier birth?

During the debate on SCHIP, there have been many political distractions diverting attention from the core issue, and there will be many more to come during the talks of compromise in the coming weeks.

We must ask those who represent us on Capitol Hill to put aside partisan politics and use their wisdom and values to see the underlying issue and understand every child in Alabama and in our nation deserves to live a safe, healthy life. It is now up to them to stand up for those people who aren't living the "American dream," but instead may work two jobs to care for their families and still can't afford to take their children to the doctor when they are sick.

Now more than ever, we need those who represent us to use their voice in government to help the millions of powerless children who have no voice in this decision.

The investment in SCHIP funding has gained broad public support and incredible bipartisan support at both the federal and state levels. However, it has come down to a compromise on this program that is critical to improving children's health.

Our president and Congress can continue to find reasons for opposing the SCHIP reauthorization legislation, but in the end they should instead choose the 10 million reasons to support it -- the 10 million uninsured children in our nation.

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