



Expand on success

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Congress should remember three things as it reconciles different approaches to reauthorizing the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program.

The first is success.

In Arizona, the program is called Kids- Care and it has lowered the number of uninsured children from 25 percent before the program began to 15 percent in 2004. Nationwide, the rate of uninsured children went from 22.5 percent to 16.9 percent.

The second is need.

In Arizona, 80,000 children are eligible for KidsCare but are not enrolled. Nationwide, 9 million children lack health insurance.

The third is focus.

This is about children's health needs, not generational warfare. The House version of reauthorization includes an increase of \$50 billion in the program, and gets part of its funding from the Medicare Advantage program for seniors. The wisdom of that program for the elderly should be debated on its merits, not put in competition with children's health insurance.

The Senate version increases funding for the children's health program by \$35 billion and relies entirely on tobacco-tax increases for funding. Using money from an unhealthy vice to fund health care may be contradictory, but it is not uncommon.

The Senate version answers some criticisms of the program.

Although Arizona limits participation to those who earn up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$40,000 for a family of four) , some states go well beyond that. New York, for example, sets eligibility at 400 percent (about \$82,600 for a family of four).

The Senate would reduce the federal match to states for coverage that goes beyond 300 percent. We think states that want to push eligibility beyond 300 percent ought to cover the entire cost.

The Senate bill also requires a phase-out of adults on the program.

In Arizona, excess KidsCare funding was used for childless adults in the early years of the program through a federal waiver. Currently, the only adults allowed on the program are parents of children on KidsCare. There are about 14,000 parents on KidsCare in Arizona, and 64,000 children.

The Arizona Legislature approved allowing parents to buy into the program because research shows that children are more likely to be taken to the doctor if the entire family is covered. However, it makes sense to focus on getting kids

covered first.

President Bush wants to hold funding at a level that Families USA says would not be enough to maintain the current enrollment. He threatens to veto either the House or Senate version of the reauthorization, which gives the Senate bill an added edge.

Unlike the House version, which was crafted solely by Democrats, the Senate version has bipartisan support and it passed by a veto-proof margin.

This federal health insurance program is a success and it should be expanded to serve the children it was designed to help.