

Suffer the children

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

President George W. Bush this week vetoed a bipartisan bill that would have extended and expanded the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Whatever the political consequences of cutting a popular health care program for kids less than two weeks before Christmas, vetoing the bill is reckless and ill-considered health policy.

Every American child deserves access to decent, affordable health insurance coverage so he or she can grow up healthy, attend school and live a productive life. But about 9.4 million children were uninsured in 2006, an increase of roughly 1 million since 2005. Many of the newly uninsured children are from middle-class families.

That's no coincidence. For nearly a decade, the percentage of businesses that offer health insurance to their workers has been slipping.

Before 2005, however, the number of uninsured children had been falling. The credit goes to Medicaid and SCHIP, which cover children in families earning too much to qualify for Medicaid but too little to afford insurance.

SCHIP was due to expire in October, but Congress passed a temporary extension. The bill vetoed this week would have revised and expanded the program.

About 5.8 million children now insured would have been covered. Most, about 3.4 million, already are eligible, but their families don't know it. The bill would have provided money for advertising and outreach.

Bush and some congressional Republicans have used specious arguments to attack SCHIP. The most outrageous, of course, is Bush's insistence that expanding health coverage for children is somehow the first step toward national health insurance - as if that were a bad thing. How can providing health care to more children be a bad thing?

Sometime over the next week, Congress probably will likely drop efforts to override Bush's vetoes - he's killed two separate SCHIP bills in recent months - and extend the program at current levels until the end of the federal fiscal year on Sept. 30. That means some 5.8 million children who could have had family doctors and vaccinations and well-child visits will have to do without, at least for another year.

It means Bush will "win." Millions of American children lose. Some victory.

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