

Children's Health Care Bill



Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM)

I believe this compromise SCHIP reauthorization bill should be enacted. The program has been a success. The number of children without health coverage has declined but the need for this program remains.

-- Press Release - September 27, 2007

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I support the passage of the compromise SCHIP reauthorization. It is a good bill.

Now, the conference committee listened ... they compromised the bill before us, and they did it in a fair way.

I am reflecting for the Senate and for those on my side of the aisle who do not understand why I am doing what I am doing and want the President to veto this bill. I do not want him to veto it. I think it is a mistake, and I am saying it right now, and I will say it again.

-- Senate Floor Statements - September 27, 2007

Senate - September 27, 2007

Mr. DOMENICI. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2007, H.R. 976. Reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Program, SCHIP, before it expires is critical to ensure health care access for millions of our Nation's children.

My home State of New Mexico has a terrible problem with uninsured children. Recent reports have New Mexico at the bottom in the Nation for coverage of children. In 1997, while I was chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, I helped to create SCHIP as part of the Balanced Budget Act. The program has been a success. Over the past decade, SCHIP has helped reduce the number of children without insurance.

The bill we are voting on today is a compromise. In August, both the House and the Senate passed two very different versions of an SCHIP reauthorization. At that time, I came down to the floor and I said I did not like what the House of Representatives was doing. I did not support the massive increases in spending and eligibility proposed by the House and I did not want a reauthorization that included revisions to the Medicare Program. The conference committee listened to these concerns, and I am pleased that the bill before us today closely resembles the SCHIP bill passed by the Senate 68-31 in August.

My comment to children's health care remains firm today. I support the passage of the compromise SCHIP reauthorization. It is a good bill. It provides \$35 billion in new resources to provide health coverage for millions more children in working families. It will strengthen outreach and enrollment efforts to make sure that all children who are eligible for the program get the services they need. It also makes improvements to the program by including language on mental health parity and dental health coverage.

Senate - September 27, 2007

Mr. DOMENICI. Mr. President, I have heard my distinguished friend from South Carolina, and have great respect for his thought process, for the way he presents things. Frankly, I do not mind listening to him, so I was here early, and I got to hear what he had to say.

But we have been working on this issue of SCHIP for more than a few months, in fact, for more than a few years. So some come in at the end and have a whole new theory about it, and others, like myself, who happened to be the Budget chairman back a few years ago, when this program was born--and I remember making room for it in a budget resolution so it could be a reserve fund, and we could end up with this amount of money. It kind of lived through 2 or 3 years of getting knocked around and not doing its job, and doing part of it, and as things progressed I ended up supporting a proposal that involved SCHIP.

This Children's Health Insurance Program Act of 2007 is now before us. I indicated my support for it when Senator CHUCK GRASSLEY and his cohort, the chairman of the Finance Committee from Montana, were putting together a compromise bill using this money that had been allocated for health care some 3 or 4 years ago. So I supported it as Senator *Grassley* and others put together a program.

New Mexico has a terrible problem with uninsured children. Nearly 25 percent of the children have no insurance--worst in the country. SCHIP will help this problem, no doubt about it.

The bill we are voting on today--whether my good friend who spoke just before me agrees with the terminology--is a compromise. Many on the other side of the aisle wanted \$50 billion to \$70 billion more in spending. On my side of the aisle, they wanted much less. Some wanted as low as \$5 billion. This bill gave us \$35 billion--right down the middle. Whether that means anything, it does to me. It means some people worked very hard to try to get a bill we could support, that would begin to get us somewhere with reference to changing the direction of health care for children who might see light someday. The bill gave us \$35 billion, I repeat.

In August, I came to the floor and made a statement. I said I did not like what the House of Representatives was doing. I said I did not support massive increases in spending and eligibility proposed by the House. I made it very clear I did not want a reauthorization that included revisions to the Medicare Program.

Now, I am just one Senator, but it turns out that five or six or seven Republican Senators somehow or other all thought the same way. They were thinking just as I was, that we were not going to let ourselves get used so that this SCHIP was opening a crack in the door, and we did not know what we were talking about, and we would open the door, and we would spend three times what we had in mind.

Well, that was not going to happen. Senator *Grassley* came around and asked, and I said: \$35 billion. That is it. If you put any more in, I am out.

I remember him coming to me and saying: Is that it?

Twice I said: That is it. Don't bother me anymore. I am your friend, but anybody can understand \$35 billion is \$35 billion. It is not \$38 billion. It is not \$50 billion. If you want to do any more, go look for somebody else to make your majority.

He said: No, I don't want to do that. I want you. Is that all you will do?

I said: Yes, that is all I will do.

So everything I did is not part of the record, but I am reflecting for the Senate and for those on my side of the aisle who do not understand why I am doing what I am doing and want the President to veto this bill. I do not want him to veto it. I think it is a mistake, and I am saying it right now, and I will say it again.

But I did say I did not want massive increases in spending and eligibility proposed by the House. I did say I did not want a reauthorization that included revisions to the Medicare Program. Clearly, I made that point. I made it not only to Senator *Grassley*, but I made it to the chairman of the committee, Senator MAX BAUCUS of Montana.

We got to where Senator *Baucus* would speak to me every 2 or 3 days and report to me what was going on. I was not on the conference. But the reason he did that was he understood if he went to conference and changed that \$35 billion, which had become a very important number, he would start losing me.

So I was just as effective as being at the conference, but so were about seven or eight others who were still on board and who still think \$35 billion is enough because the cheapest insurance around is insurance to cover children.

We all know that. Now, that is not degrading. It is a fact. You can buy more insurance for children per dollar than for any other class of people. That is logical. Children do not get sick as much as old people. They do not get sick as much as middle-aged people. So they are healthy. The insurance is cheap.

Now, the conference committee listened--the one that Senator *Grassley* and Senator *Baucus* were part of--they compromised the bill before us, and they did it in a fair way. What was fair? Thirty-five billion dollars--no more, no less--the amount we had agreed to that we said we would help them with. If they wanted to dream about big dreams for this small program--that I remember vividly we started in the Budget Committee, and it languished around. We started it some 4 years ago, or 5. I have not been back as chairman of that committee for quite a while, so it was not done yesterday.

The conference committee, as I said, listened, and they did exactly what Senator *Grassley* and Senator *Baucus* had told us would happen. They provided \$35 billion in new resources to provide health coverage for millions more children in working families.

Here we get into an argument: Who is working in families and who is not? Well, I understand we could have that argument and extend it beyond 8 o'clock. We could be here until morning. But we are not going to do that. It is established.

It strengthens outreach and enrollment efforts to make sure all children who are eligible for the program get the services they need. That has always been a problem with children. The Presiding Officer knows that. We cover children, and then in 2 years they come back and say: Yes, we covered them, but they did not get covered.

What do you mean?

Well, we did not find them.

Well, how do we find them?

Well, the best way is to wait until they go to the emergency room, and then you find them in the emergency room and you sign them up.

I thought: My, is that the best way we can do it? It turns out it is very difficult, especially among our poor people, to get them to round up their children and come and get them lined up. The best way is if they happen to go to a hospital. You get them then. You don't want them to go to a hospital, but I am telling you what it turns out to be. Maybe it has changed since I last worked on this. Years do go by. But I think what I said is still right.

It also makes improvements to the program such as mental health parity, which I know a little bit about. I am glad this legislation ensures plans that offer mental health services provide benefits that are equivalent to other physician and health services. This is one of the most

difficult areas of unfairness for American coverage we have had, and we are making big strides toward resolving it. This bill makes its little contribution to resolving that problem.

The administration has issued a statement indicating the President will veto this legislation. Mr. President, that is a mistake. Maybe you will win; maybe you won't. I guess in the Senate you won't win, Mr. President. Maybe you will win in the House. I don't know. But this will not go away. It is solved. It ought to be done. We ought to go on and look somewhere else if we are going to try to find money to save. Those who think this is a great veto item, I think what I have just explained is, it is not a very good one. We ought to go ahead and take care of some of the children and get on to some other issues.

A majority of my colleagues have said they support this bill. Sixty-nine Members voted for cloture this morning--cloture meaning to cut off debate and get on with the vote.

My commitment to children's health care remains firm today. It remains as firm as when I agreed to the first use of SCHIP money in a new and different, innovative way so its asset value could multiply significantly. I support the passage of the compromise SCHIP reauthorization.

All in all, it is a pretty good bill. I hope it outlasts our debate and is voted on tonight. Then I hope it is not vetoed by the President.

I yield the floor and thank the Presiding Officer for recognizing me.