
Iowa Fiscal Partnership

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Despite Rhetoric, Package Blocks Illegal Access Children's Health Insurance Package Fixes Problems

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Sept. 27, 2007) — A compromise package in Congress for children's health insurance enables Iowa and other states to choose the best way to document eligibility for the service.

The bill makes corrections in a year-old citizenship documentation requirement that actually made it more difficult for U.S. Citizens to gain access to Medicaid.

Iowa U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, who has led bipartisan efforts to pass the health-insurance package, on Wednesday criticized claims being raised in the House that the bill made it easier for illegal immigrants to receive services. Gov. Chet Culver took aim at such remarks by Rep. Steve King, the only member of Iowa's congressional delegation to oppose the package.

Grassley stated on the Senate floor Wednesday that the use of "desperate" suggestions about access for illegal immigrants "simply strains credibility."

"Senator Grassley is correct: Arguments about immigrants on this issue are misleading and overheated rhetoric," said David Osterberg, executive director of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project. "Likewise, it's good to see Governor Culver standing up to these claims.

"It's unfortunate to see other members of Congress distracting the very real issues about children's health insurance with this nonsense."

King, in a statement on Wednesday, called the bill "a guaranteed windfall for illegal aliens."

Congress is in the process of reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, which funds insurance for 37,000 kids in Iowa and 6 million nationwide.

The bipartisan proposal passed by the House on Tuesday and supported actively by Grassley and others would increase coverage by about 3.8 million nationally.

Census estimates 44,000 Iowa children are without health insurance, most of whom are eligible for, but not receiving, SCHIP or Medicaid. Families USA estimates over 26,000 additional kids in Iowa would be reached.

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Iowa Department of Human Services officials have said citizenship documentation requirements for health services including SCHIP have not shown a problem of undocumented immigrants attempting to receive services that are limited to U.S. citizens.

“In fact, they have seen an impact on low-income U.S. citizens who have trouble providing the proper identification, such as a passport or birth certificate,” Osterberg noted. “Denying services to people eligible for them is clearly not the intent of the program, and should not be an accepted consequence of any documentation requirements.”

Under the legislation, citizenship is required for SCHIP or Medicaid services, and states could document it by verifying an individual’s name and Social Security number with the Social Security Administration. States could be penalized if invalid cases exceeded 3 percent.

“This compromise bill in Congress would not make undocumented immigrants eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP, period,” Osterberg said.

“It’s important to understand that a Social Security card or number isn’t enough — the information must be checked against official U.S. records. This screening assures accountability with the original goal of documentation,” he said.

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a joint budget and tax analysis initiative of two nonpartisan, Iowa-based organizations, the Iowa Policy Project in Mount Vernon/Iowa City, and the Child & Family Policy Center in Des Moines.

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