

Is there still no room in our inn for the most famous poor baby in history?

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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In this holy season of Advent, tens of millions of Christians are waiting for and preparing to celebrate the birthday of the most famous poor baby in history on Christmas Day. Yet that baby – born in a stable after being denied a room in the inn for his birth over 2,000 years ago – might still find "no room" signs in the health care inn in the richest nation on earth in 2009.

As Congress debates national health reform, affordable, accessible and comprehensive health coverage for all children should be a no brainer and a top priority in a moral and economically sensible nation. Instead, millions of children face the huge danger of being worse off after health reform than they are today if the successful and cost effective Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is abolished as the House bill proposes.

The popular CHIP program was enacted in 1997 with the bipartisan leadership of Sens. Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch. President Obama renewed it on February 4, 2009, after two vetoes by President Bush. At that time he correctly said: "We fulfill one of the highest responsibilities we have: to ensure the health and well-being of our nation's children" and "No child in America should be receiving her primary care in the emergency room in the middle of the night. No child should be falling behind in school because he can't hear the teacher or see the blackboard. I refuse to accept that millions of our kids fail to reach their potential because we fail to meet their basic needs. In a decent society, there are certain obligations that are not subject to tradeoffs or negotiations – health care for our children is one of those obligations." I could not agree more.

Yet ten months later, as Congress debates and prepares to vote on urgently needed national health reform for all, the House of Representatives has enacted a bill that abolishes the successful CHIP program on December 31, 2013 and would turn millions of CHIP children over to a new, untested, more expensive Health Insurance Exchange on January 1, 2014. This new Exchange is driven largely by insurance companies and does not provide the cost sharing and benefit protections CHIP children currently enjoy. Millions of CHIP children would be worse, rather than better, off as parents have to pay more for less.

This must not happen! We must keep CHIP at least until 2019 as an amendment by Sen. Jay Rockefeller in the Senate Finance Committee, included in the Senate leadership bill, proposes. The savings from the Rockefeller amendment, however, were not used to continue funding for CHIP or to take steps to make it work even better, building on practices we know work.

Fortunately Congress has another chance to right this wrong and let children keep a program that works and is more cost effective than the proposed Exchange. On November 30th, Pennsylvania Sen. Bob Casey introduced a new amendment (#2790) to protect and improve CHIP until 2019 to give us time to see how the new Exchange will work and whether it is a safe and more cost effective way to serve children. Casey's amendment would fully fund CHIP and make it work even better by making it easier for parents to get and keep their children enrolled. It would make CHIP mandatory in all states for children in working families with incomes at least up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level (\$55,000 for a family of four) and end the unjust lottery of geography and 50 different state eligibility standards. The Casey amendment also would ensure CHIP children the same comprehensive benefits children in Medicaid get.

God did not make two or 50 different classes of children and neither should our laws. All

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children deserve an equitable national health safety net guarantee like seniors. I'm grateful for my Medicare and how simple it was to get it this year. I would not have liked it if I lived in a state where it was available at some minimally decent level or if I faced huge bureaucratic hurdles to qualify. My grandchildren, and all children, are as or more important than I am and it is time for adults to treat them justly. Millions of child lives hang in the balance.

Children are the only group in national health reform being denied the right to keep the health coverage they have that works and is cost effective. And they are the only group who will end up worse off by the millions – sacrificed to help underwrite the administrative costs and profits of wealthy insurance and drug companies. Children lack the powerful political voice to fight back, to vote, to host fundraisers, and to spend hundreds of millions of dollars like well-connected insurance and drug companies do to lobby and protect their special interests. As the poorest age group in America – a plight no other less wealthy industrialized nation permits – children are getting poorer and poorer as epidemic joblessness persists and homelessness and hunger and hopelessness increase. Yet some in Congress are trying to pit poor children against poor adults but that is not the right tradeoff; both desperately need help. What would that poor vulnerable baby millions of us worship say we should do for the millions of vulnerable children and adults shut out of our health care system today?

The lives and health of millions of children depend on what you and I do to protect them now! We adults – parents, grandparents, people of faith – need to stand up to our political leaders in both parties and not let our children become expendable political collateral to bigger and more powerful interests. Our children will not get what they need to survive, thrive and learn unless we speak out and demand that Sen. Casey's Children's CHIP Amendment be passed and included in final health reform legislation.

Today, please urge your Senator to co-sponsor and vote for it when it comes to the Senate floor. Send emails and letters and make calls until our children's needs are heard and met. Children have only one childhood. Let's ensure now they enjoy rather than lose it.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.