

## Hometown News: Congressman vows continued fight to expand health care program

My Hometown News

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October 26, 2007

PORT ST. LUCIE - U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney (D-Palm Beach) pledged last week to "not give up" on a bill to expand the availability of health insurance to qualified children.

One day after Congress failed to override President Bush's veto to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, Rep. Tim Mahoney (D-Palm Beach) addressed the issue while visiting the Port St. Lucie KinderCare Learning Center.

"We're going to bring another bill and we won't negotiate down the number of children," said Rep. Mahoney.

SCHIP is a national program that provides health insurance for families whose income is too high to allow eligibility for Medicaid, but not high enough for them to afford private insurance.

SCHIP was created in 1997 and falls under title XXI of the Social Security Act.

According to Rep. Mahoney, the recent bipartisan bill would have added approximately 10,000 children to SCHIP in St. Lucie County alone.

"The bill we passed that the president vetoed was a good bill that covered 10 million additional children in Florida," he said.

"Right now in St. Lucie County, we have roughly 5,000 children that take advantage of SCHIP. The number of children we need to cover approaches 15,000. So basically today, about one-third of children who need access to health care in

this county are not getting it," said Rep. Mahoney.

Rep. Mahoney called the bill "fiscally responsible."

"We were gong to pay for this program with an increase in tobacco tax, so it was a good trade-off for the kids. I don't understand why the president vetoed it," he said.

According to Rep. Mahoney, the bill would not have changed the household income eligibility requirements of SCHIP. However, the additional money available through the increased tobacco tax would allow families who are currently on an SCHIP waiting list to receive the medical insurance.

"It simply expands the number of dollars (for the SCHIP program) and the number of kids," he said.

The SCHIP program allows each state to set the maximum amount of household income a family may have and still be eligible for SCHIP.

"Current law provides SCHIP eligibility to children at 200 percent of federal poverty line (FPL) or below - unless the state petitions to have this level raised," said Jessica Santillo, spokeswoman for Rep. Mahoney.

"SCHIP eligibility in Florida is at 200 percent of FPL or below. That means, to qualify for SCHIP in Florida, if you are a child from a family of four, your family income would have to be \$41,300 or less," said Ms. Santillo, who noted that the federal proverty line for a family of four is \$20,650 in annual income.

President Bush, in a speech he delivered in Lancaster, Pa., the day he vetoed the bill, said passage of the law would have expanded the program to a degree that was contrary to the original intent of SCHIP.

"It is estimated that if this program were to become law, one out of every three persons that would subscribe to the new expanded SCHIP would leave private insurance," he said.

President Bush also expressed concern that expansion of the SCHIP program was a step toward federalized health care.

"I happen to believe that what you're seeing when you expand eligibility for federal programs in the desire by some in

Washington, D.C. to federalize health care. I don't think that's good for the country. I believe in private medicine. I believe in helping poor people - which was the intent of SCHIP, now being extended beyond its initial intent. I also believe the federal government should make it easier for people to afford private insurance. I don't want the federal government making decisions for doctors and customers," said President Bush.

Rep. Mahoney said the President's veto will make him work harder to get another bill passed.

"Right now in St. Lucie County, we've got one in five working families where you have a mother and father and two children with an average income of \$42,000 that don't have health insurance, and that number's growing," said Rep. Mahoney.