

CHIP stalemate may slow health care reform in Utah

Matt Canham The Salt Lake Tribune

Posted: 8:39 PM- WASHINGTON - Efforts to reform health care in Utah may be hampered by the inability of national leaders to compromise on funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, say advocates and state leaders. President Bush vetoed another CHIP bill Wednesday that would have provided \$35 billion over the next five years to help an additional 10 million low-income children receive health insurance.

Bush rejected the Democratic-backed expansion for the second time this year because the money would have come from a new tobacco tax and he thought growing the program would lure families from the private insurance market. The vetoes leave the future of CHIP in limbo. The president expects Congress to pass a continuing resolution that would keep federal money flowing to the states at the current levels. Some expect that resolution to last as long as a year, while others are hoping Congress will once again try to expand CHIP after the holidays.

Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch, one of the biggest advocates for CHIP, said he is not ready to put the issue aside, even after two failed attempts to gain enough support to override the president.

"I remain hopeful that we will be able to reach a compromise with the House by late January," Hatch said. By then, the Utah Legislature will be in the middle of its annual session, knee deep in discussions over the governor's health care proposals.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. wants to get every Utahn insured and a big part of that effort is expanding enrollment into government programs like Medicaid and CHIP. Uncertainty nationally could lead to problems in Utah, worries Lincoln Nehring from the **Utah Health Policy Project**.

"It really presents challenges for us as we look toward the future," he said.

Huntsman wants to offer CHIP to more families. The state now signs up people making twice the poverty level, or \$41,300 for a family of four. Huntsman wants to bump that up to 250 percent of poverty or \$51,625 for a family of four.

But that takes legislative approval and about \$2 million in additional funding.

State Sen. Sheldon Killpack, R-Syracuse, echoing President Bush's concerns about the national expansion plan, isn't sure that is such a good idea.

Killpack and other Utah lawmakers have traveled to Washington, D.C., and met with administration health officials, who showed how expanding CHIP leads to "crowd out," the Washington term for families who drop their private coverage to get public assistance.

"I'm a little skeptical and apprehensive of expanding CHIP at this point," said Killpack, a leader in the Senate Republican Caucus.

Advocates argue the expansion of public programs could help reduce the number of Utahns without insurance by more than 100,000 people.

Nehring also worries lawmakers will also balk at the change because of the unpredictable federal budget. "I'm sure we are going to hear the statement, 'We don't want to invest in CHIP because we are not sure the federal government is going to hold up its end of the bargain,' " he said.

Nathan Checketts, the state CHIP director, said Utah has enough federal money to continue the program through the spring, even if Congress doesn't provide any more help.

"Utah is not in danger of needing to close the program or force families to leave," he said.

Killpack, for one, plans to move slowly with any reform proposals, including an expansion of CHIP.

"I think health care reform is going to take multiple years," he said. "It is simply not going to happen in one session." And with Wednesday's veto, it appears CHIP expansion won't happen in one session of Congress either.

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