UCLA: UCLA hospital to rally against Bush’s health insurance veto

LOS ANGELES -- President Bush has indicated he will veto a $35 billion dollar bill that will expand the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP.

Pediatric residents at Mattel Children’s Hospital at UCLA held one of many rallies across the country Tuesday to encourage medical professionals and others to rally against the veto.

Dr. Devon Rossetto said over 32 residency programs nationwide agreed to conduct simultaneous “Stand up for Kids” events and wore light blue ribbons in support of SCHIP.

"The way it works is for every $1 the state puts in, the federal government puts in $2," said Rossetto, who is part of the Community Health and Advocacy Track residency program.

She added that if Bush vetoes the bill, "no state is going to be able to continue."

In California, SCHIP is known as Healthy Families.

During the rally, physician-in-chief for Mattel Children’s Hospital Dr. Edward McCabe said the president should not make this a partisan issue.

"Mr. President, please stop playing politics with our children’s lives," he said.

One pediatrician at the event, Dr. Victor Perez, said Bush’s veto could jeopardize some children’s access to medical attention.

"There are a lot of poor kids and working class kids who can’t afford to (see a doctor)," Perez said. "A lot of families will have to choose between spending their money between food and rent or seeing a doctor."

He added that programs like Healthy Families are for children whose parents make too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private health insurance.

"This program is for families (whose) parents work, and the amount of money we’re investing in children is very important for the future of the country," he said.

The Senate passed the bill with enough votes to override the veto, if necessary, with 18 Republicans lining up with Democrats. But the House fell about two dozen votes shy of the number needed to override.

House Minority Whip Roy Blunt, R-Mo., said he was absolutely confident the House would sustain Bush’s veto.

Blunt and other Republican congressional leaders met with Bush at the White House on Tuesday.

Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott, R-Miss., said Congress should be able to reach a compromise with Bush once he vetoes the bill.

"We can do this," Lott said. "But we should not allow it to be expanded to higher and higher income levels and to adults. This is about poor children. But we can work it out, and I hope after we get through the politics
of the next couple of days, we can get down to serious business."

Bush argues the expansion is a step toward socialized medicine and would entice people with private coverage to switch to government-financed plans.

But McCabe said the funding from the bill is not significant and said a recent study from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that the bill would not be able to maintain SCHIP at its current level.

"Even with additional funding, which is even quite modest, the program won't be able to maintain the (number of) kids it's been able to maintain in the last 10 years," he said.

Ryan Coller, a pediatric resident, was also at the event and said the program is not likely to lead to socialized medicine.

"I don't think the goal of this program is to provide universal health care ... it targets the working class," he said.

He said he attended the event because he wanted to advocate for families who may otherwise have to prioritize paying their medical bills over rent and food.

"I've been motivated to action due to the need to stand up for children who don't otherwise have a voice and demand health care on their behalf," Coller said.

McCabe said Mattel Children's Hospital will see children who require medical attention, even if they are uninsured, but not all hospitals will do the same.

"We see them if they show up in the emergency room. ... We will hospitalize them and take care of them," he said. "My concern is less for kids at Mattel Children's Hospital but more for the kids in other places who don't have hospitals who will provide care for them."

McCabe added that if Bush vetoes the bill, some families without insurance will try to postpone seeking medical attention for their children, and delays in care can result in children succumbing to treatable diseases.

"Stand up for Kids" was just one of over 200 events planned throughout the country to highlight the issue, according to Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union.

Support groups, which include MoveOn.org and several unions, plan to flood Congress with "hundreds of thousands of calls, letters and e-mails, all demanding that members of Congress vote to override Bush's SCHIP veto," McEntee told reporters.

Rosetto said the focus has especially been on contacting House representatives who voted against the bill and encouraging them to overturn Bush's veto.

"It's a grassroots movement that sort of happened in the last week. ... There wasn't as much momentum until the president indicated he was going to veto the bill."

The legislation would potentially add 4 million children to the health care program, increasing spending from about $5 billion to $12 billion annually for the next five years. The additional spending would be paid for through a $.60 increase in the federal excise tax on a pack of cigarettes.

White House Press Secretary Dana Perino said the tax would hit the poor hardest because smokers tend to fall in the lower-income level.

"It's just completely irresponsible. Stop the madness on Capitol Hill," Perino said.

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