



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

Senate Democrats Urge Majority Leader Joe Bruno To Sway GOP-Ally Bush From Regulations Jeopardizing Health Care For 60,000 New York Kids

MALCOLM A. SMITH August 30, 2007

State Senate Democratic Leader Malcolm A. Smith (D-St. Albans) and members of the Senate Democratic Conference today condemned new Bush administration guidelines thwarting state legislation to extend health care coverage to thousands of uninsured New York children.

Democratic lawmakers also called on Majority Leader Joe Bruno to use his influence as New York's top Republican elected official in persuading the Bush administration to retract its latest position so New York can proceed with bipartisan plans to provide as many as 60,000 uninsured children with affordable health coverage through the state's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The CHIP proposal is part of a comprehensive package to provide health care for all of New York's 400,000 uninsured children.

"We have voiced our opposition to this shift in policy, which causes a major hardship for our constituencies, and we will continue working with leaders at all levels of government to hasten its reversal," said Smith who today wrote to the Centers For Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) objecting to its last-minute policy changes, which were outlined in an August 17 letter signed by CMS chief Dennis G. Smith (see below).

"Now we ask that Senator Bruno echo our call," Smith added. "As New York State's highest-ranking Republican elected official, Senator Bruno is uniquely positioned to influence his GOP allies at the federal level to do what is right for children desperately in need of health care."

Passed into law in 1990, Child Health Plus is New York State's Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Subsidized in part by the federal government, New York's program is therefore subject to federal guidelines.

The 2007-08 New York State Budget includes \$10.6 million to expand Child Health Plus income eligibility from 250 percent of the federal poverty level to 400 percent, requiring a CMS waiver. However, the Bush administration's last-minute changes in policy state that before any CHIP program like Child Health Plus can be expanded, a state must first enroll at least 95 percent of children who are currently eligible under existing income guidelines.

Smith called this an unreasonable obstacle to providing more children with affordable health coverage, noting the 88 percent utilization rate of Child Health Plus in New York State, which well exceeds the national average.

"I certainly agree we must do everything necessary to boost enrollment by communicating the benefits of effective programs like Child Health Plus. However, it is outrageous for the Bush administration to deny thousands of kids coverage simply because six percent of New Yorkers currently eligible haven't opted in," Smith said.

Under the new Bush administration policy, a child must also be uninsured for an entire year before qualifying for CHIP. Smith said the provision seriously jeopardizes continuity of care, an important goal of public health care initiatives.

"These new restrictions came about under cover of night as New York and several other states made highly publicized plans to expand their children's health insurance programs, and while Congress was debating expansion of federal eligibility requirements," Smith added. "I hope that Senator Bruno joins the resounding call on the Bush administration to reverse this shameful decision."
