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Commentary

State's children require expanded health plan

Jack Kresnak

In 1918, as World War I was winding down, President Woodrow Wilson declared a "Children's Year" to make the welfare of American children a priority for the nation. "The health of the child is the power of the nation," Wilson said, signaling decades of federal policy initiatives to improve the health, safety and educational opportunities for children and making America an economic powerhouse.

Today, the United States and especially Michigan face a frightening economic crisis. But our state also faces a crisis in the systems that provide basic medical care for hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Michigan children -- Medicaid and MICHild, which require state funds to match much larger amounts of federal dollars.

MICHild, which insures 30,000 children whose families are not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid, falls under the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program, commonly called SCHIP. Reauthorization of the federal program, which expires in March, was twice vetoed by President George W. Bush. And Medicaid has become a costly burden for a state with declining revenues suffering the nation's worst unemployment rate.

Children who lack basic health insurance face daunting challenges. They are five times more likely than insured children to have at least one delayed or unmet health care and dental need, four times more likely to not get prescription medications they need to control problems such as asthma and diabetes, and three times as likely to have an unmet need for mental health services. It is shocking that there are about 160,000 kids in Michigan who lack health insurance -- an outrage on both moral and economic grounds since unhealthy children grow up to be adults who earn less and have health and behavior issues that drain public resources.

It is time to invest in our economic future by funding programs that improve the health of our children. President-elect Barack Obama proposes to not only expand SCHIP to cover more children from low-income families, but also to provide a temporary boost in the federal shares of Medicaid to relieve some of the burden on states like Michigan.

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