SCHIP Short 10 Votes, Negotiations Start Again

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Congress and the Bush administration headed back to the negotiating table in mid-October after the House of Representatives failed to override President Bush's veto of the State Children's Health Insurance Program reauthorization legislation.

The House voted 273-156 to override the President's SCHIP veto, but that was 10 votes short of the needed two-thirds majority.

The House vote was split down party lines, with 229 Democrats and 44 Republicans voting in favor of the SCHIP veto override, and 154 Republicans and 2 Democrats voting against.

SCHIP expired on Sept. 30, but a continuing resolution ensures that the program is funded through Nov. 16.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has said she aims to bring a new version of the SCHIP legislation to the floor for a vote ahead of that deadline, Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, said in an interview.

Mr. Pollack predicted that compromises would be crafted around the issues that concern the White House, which he calls "myths."

Among those that he noted are: that the law would cover children in families earning up to $83,000 a year, and that illegal immigrants would be eligible for coverage. These issues led a majority of House Republicans to vote in line with President Bush, he said.

Dr. Jay E. Berkelhamer, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said in a statement that "the rhetoric of those who opposed the legislation to reauthorize SCHIP demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of the bill."

Dr. Berkelhamer noted that the legislation would have blocked enrollment of many adults and children the White House has considered not eligible for the program, "while still providing states flexibility and financial support for enrollment of up to 4 million low-income eligible children."

The White House claimed victory after the House failed to override the veto.

"As it is clear that this legislation lacks sufficient support to become law, now is the time for Congress to stop playing politics and to join the President in finding common ground to reauthorize this vital program," according to a White House statement.

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Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) blasted the Bush administration, saying that the White House was out of touch with the American people. "It is appalling that the administration would declare victory after denying health care to 10 million of the neediest children in America," Rep. Rangel said in a statement.

The White House said it had appointed a team to negotiate with Congress to make sure at least 500,000 children who currently are eligible for SCHIP, but not receiving benefits, would be enrolled in the program.

"If enrolling these children requires more than the 20% funding increase proposed by the President, we will work with Congress to find the necessary money," according to a statement from the White House.

About 6 million children are currently enrolled in SCHIP. The congressional proposal would have increased funding by about $7 billion a year, adding as many as 4 million children to the SCHIP rolls.

The American College of Physicians said it would push for passage of a new bill, but one that would ensure coverage for those additional children. "The current SCHIP formula does not go far enough," said Dr. David C. Dale, ACP president, in a statement.

Similarly, the American Medical Association said it was committed to expanding coverage.

"The number of uninsured kids has increased by nearly 1 million over the past 2 years, and action must be taken to reverse this growing trend," said Dr. Edward Langston, AMA board chair, in a statement. ■

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