



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

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September 27, 2007

First Lady Laura Bush
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mrs. Bush,

I am writing on behalf of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, to thank you for your tireless advocacy on behalf of children, particularly in the areas of education and early childhood development, and to ask for your help in forging a solution for another critically important issue – access to health coverage for our nation's low-income children.

We are grateful for your life-long commitment to children and wish to raise to your personal attention an urgent issue facing 15 million of our nation's most vulnerable children. On September 30th, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) is set to expire. SCHIP is an enormously successful, bipartisan program to ensure that health coverage is available for children in working families whose parents earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to purchase health insurance on their own. Because of SCHIP, the number of uninsured children in our nation has been reduced by nearly one-third over the last decade. And, by significant margins, Congress has enacted bipartisan legislation to reauthorize this program. The only thing standing in the way of SCHIP reauthorization is the veto that has been promised by the President.

Just as you have been weighing in with Members of Congress on education issues in recent weeks, we urge you to weigh in with the President on the importance of assuring access to health care for low-income children. Attached you will find more than 1,000 letters written by children from across this great nation, carrying the message that our nation's children understand the connection between being healthy and leading healthy and productive lives. They are writing to you, Mrs. Bush, to ask for your help to ensure that health coverage is available for the millions of children in this country who are uninsured.

Children's health coverage is a fundamental issue – children cannot read if they have poor vision, they cannot understand their teachers if they cannot hear, and they cannot learn if they are sick. As an educator, you understand that health and education go hand-in-hand and we cannot improve the lives and well-being of children if we don't pay attention to both areas. Our nation ranks 21st in the world in infant mortality, with many children dying before their first birthday. We can and must do better for our nation's children. They represent one-fourth of our population but all of our future.

When the President ran for re-election in 2004, at the Republican National Convention, he promised to “lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for the government's health insurance programs.” The legislation awaiting the President’s approval would reduce the number of uninsured children by more than three million, with the overwhelming majority of those who would get covered being precisely the children the President targeted in his speech -- those already eligible for but unenrolled in Medicaid and SCHIP. Unfortunately, the President is now poised to veto this program, leaving millions of children with no place to turn when they are sick.

As our nation's First Lady, your fresh perspective and voice are needed to persuade the President not to veto this important program. Millions of children across this country would benefit from your help, as there are the current 6.6 million children who rely on SCHIP and another 8-9 million children in America who live without health insurance coverage on a daily basis. SCHIP has been an incredible success story for our nation over the last decade, including the last 6 1/2 years of the Bush Administration. We cannot backtrack on that success. Instead, we should forge ahead and improve the lives and well-being of our nation’s most precious resource, our children.

In the news this year, we learned of the tragic deaths of Deamonte Driver and Devonte Johnson, whose dental infection and kidney cancer, respectively, were left untreated due to the lack of insurance coverage. America is a kind and generous nation and Americans find this avoidable loss of life unacceptable. It is the reason that, by a 2-1 margin, Republican voters support the SCHIP bill that was sent to the President this week. On behalf of our nation’s children, including the 1,000 who wrote letters to you, we urge you to weigh in on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley
President
First Focus