



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Cao backs Demos on child health plan

House OKs expanded coverage 289-139

Thursday, January 15, 2009

By Jonathan Tilove

and Bruce Alpert%%par%%Washington bureau

WASHINGTON -- New Orleans Rep. Anh "Joseph" Cao parted company with the other Republicans in the Louisiana delegation Wednesday, voting to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program for the poor, a prime Democratic legislative goal.

It was the second time since Cao was sworn into Congress last week that he found himself voting contrary to the other five Republicans in the Louisiana delegation. Last week he supported another Democratic initiative intended to improve the prospects of women pressing wage discrimination cases in court.

The S-CHIP reauthorization passed 289-139, with 40 Republicans joining Democrats in approving the bill.

"Well, first and foremost, I do believe that children, especially children of indigent families, should have access to health care, and I believe that we, as a governing body, have the duty to take care of those children who are in need and do not have access to health care," Cao said after the vote.

The House earlier rejected, 179-247, a Republican motion that would have required states to insure 90 percent of children living under 200 percent of the poverty level before covering families that are not as badly off.

Cao said that while he supported that effort to direct the program to "the poorest of the poor," he believed that the final bill still merited support.

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, complained that the bill didn't include a GOP provision to expand verification requirements to ensure illegal immigrants don't receive benefits.

"I am disappointed that some members of Congress are attempting to make it the law of the land for illegal immigrants to receive federal health benefits," Scalise said.

The bill bars federal funds from being used to provide benefits for people who don't lawfully reside in the United States. But Scalise said without better verification procedures, fraud is likely.

The legislation gives states the option to cover children and pregnant women lawfully residing in the United States, without requiring them to wait the normal five years for eligibility under Medicaid. It would be left for the states to decide whether to provide the coverage before the five-year time frame is reached.

Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, one of the three doctor-congressmen in the Louisiana delegation, expressed concern that in choosing to increase cigarette taxes to cover the costs of expanding benefits, Congress runs the risk of serious underfinancing as smoking rates continue to decline. Rep. John Fleming, R-Minden, another of the doctors in the House, agreed.

"The concept of paying for health care by taxing smoking -- a health crisis we are diligently trying to decrease -- is ludicrous," Fleming said. "I will not support protecting vulnerable children with a declining revenue stream."

This bill should focus solely on expanding access to health care for low-income children, said Rep. Billy Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge, the third doctor in the delegation. "Instead, it includes adults without children and people in New Jersey making \$86,000 a year. This puts the children's health-care program in jeopardy. I supported expanding health care funding for children in need, but voted against putting this important program at risk."

Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, now the only Democrat in the Louisiana House delegation, accused the Republicans of using scare tactics in their effort to block the legislation.

"Every child deserves the chance to grow up healthy and strong, and this bill will make sure more Louisiana children have that opportunity," Melancon said. "To be clear, this bill does not provide coverage for illegal immigrants. It does not provide coverage for children from high-income families. It does not create government-run health care. In fact, states cover most children under S-CHIP by enrolling them in private health insurance plans."

.....

Bruce Alpert can be reached at balpert@timespicayune.com or 202.383.7861. Jonathan Tilove can be reached at jtilove@timespicayune.com or 202.383.7827.