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Health insurance bill gets signature

More children now eligible for program

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By **Bruce Alpert**

Washington bureau

WASHINGTON -- Just three and a half hours after the House gave its final passage Wednesday, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill that will expand a health insurance program for children.

"It's hard to overstate the toll this takes on our families: the sleepless nights worrying that someone's going to get hurt or praying that a sick child gets better on her own," Obama said. "The decisions that no parent should ever have to make -- how long to put off that doctor's appointment, whether to fill that prescription, whether to let a child play outside, knowing that all it takes is one accident, one injury, to send your family into financial ruin."

The so-called SCHIP program is designed to help working-class families who earn too much for Medicare but cannot afford health insurance and do not get it from their employers. The bill continues coverage for the 7.4 million current enrollees and loosens some eligibility rules to the point that congressional experts say 11 million children could qualify.

Similar legislation had been vetoed twice by former President George W. Bush.

While Families USA, a liberal advocacy group, estimated that as many as 82,000 Louisiana children could gain coverage, state Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan Levine said the number will be significantly lower.

The state had already increased eligibility to 250 percent of the poverty rate, Levine said. An increase to 300 percent of the poverty rate, as allowed under the legislation, would add perhaps 1,800 children to the 126,049 now enrolled in LACHIP, Louisiana's Children's Health Insurance Program, he said.

If the state also drops a five-year waiting period for the children of legal immigrants, as the bill authorizes, that would add another 800 to 1,200 children.

Levine said he does not yet know how many additional children would be enrolled if the state agrees to provide matching funds for one new provision in the federal legislation, allowing states, through Medicaid, to provide dental coverage to children already covered by private medical coverage but without any dental benefits.

Among those attending the White House signing ceremony was Ashanti George-Paulin and her son, Joshua, 11, who was born with a speech impediment. George-Paulin said SCHIP has allowed her son to undergo speech therapy and helped make him a healthy and good student.

She said President Obama and his wife, Michelle, shook her son's hand and the president gave him some "personal encouragement."

"It was an awesome experience," said George-Paulin, a member of the Greater King Solomon Baptist Church and the PICA Louisiana Interfaith Together coalition.

The legislation, approved 290-135 by the House, drew the support of two of Louisiana's seven members: Democrat Charlie Melancon, of Napoleonville, and freshman Republican Anh "Joseph" Cao, of New Orleans.

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Bruce Alpert can be reached at balpert@timespicayune.com or 202.383.7861.