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Reauthorization of SCHIP a gift for mom

By Mike Owen

Mother's Day has come, but shopping for a gift isn't over. Somehow, it doesn't seem enough to get mom a plant, or take her out to eat. Moms everywhere dedicate their lives to caring for their families. They lose sleep over a child's cough or fever and get kids to a doctor when needed, if they can.

In our family, my mom was a nurse at Mercy Hospital. Now she's retired, but she understands the need for quality health care as much as anyone.

So I know what I'd like to get her: an assurance that all kids in the United States have access to quality health care. How about we all go together and offer that tribute to all mothers in America?

It's possible, and increasingly it's happening through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP. In Iowa, we know it as *hawk-i*, for Healthy and Well Kids in Iowa. A bipartisan creation that brings state and federal resources together to insure children, SCHIP is up for reauthorization this year, and bipartisan options to improve it are on the table.

Whatever approach is chosen, it should follow a tried and true medical principle: First, do no harm. No changes should cause children to lose coverage, or undermine established state efforts to cover more children.

In SCHIP reauthorization, we need enough resources to make it possible to reach more uninsured children and enough stability and predictability in federal funding to help states design their programs effectively.

One bipartisan plan, by Sens. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va), Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), would assure significant new federal resources for children's health coverage. It would raise funding for SCHIP by \$50 billion over five years, which could cover 6 million more kids and increase coverage among American children by two-thirds.

For Iowa's part, the governor and the Legislature expanded state funding to cover 10,000 additional Iowa children, but only if Iowa receives sufficient matching SCHIP funds from the federal government. Iowa would reduce the number of uninsured kids by at least 20 percent with a federal commitment along the lines of the Rockefeller-Snowe bill. This would help mothers and improve the health of Iowa's most precious resource, its children.

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Without those funds, Iowa could see more uninsured children, with serious health consequences. In Iowa, more than 37,000 children are enrolled in either *hawk-i* or a SCHIP-funded expansion of the Medicaid program. In Johnson County, 676 were enrolled in March, with 312 in Washington County, 191 in Cedar County, and 161 in Iowa County. Statewide, more than one-third of Iowa's youngest children (birth to 3) now rely upon Medicaid and *hawk-i* for their health care.

Reversing course now would be a mistake. It would reduce the ability of the federal and state governments to pool resources to expand health coverage where the private sector has fallen short. Sens. Charles Grassley and Tom Harkin -- and Rep. Dave Loebsack -- can be heroes for the state by supporting a SCHIP reauthorization bill that enables Iowa to cover more children.

Committing to health care for kids is in keeping with the nurturing spirit of mothers that we celebrate today. Happy Mother's Day, Mom.

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