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Congress Supports Health Care for Millions of Children Bill Will Help Wisconsin Strengthen BadgerCare Plus

Madison – The U.S. Senate voted 66 to 32 Thursday to extend and strengthen federal support for the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Similar legislation was approved by Congress twice in 2007 with bipartisan support, but was vetoed by President Bush.

“Passage of the SCHIP bill will enable Wisconsin to come extremely close to the goal of health insurance for all children,” said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. “Wisconsin made tremendous progress in children’s health care coverage last year, thanks to the BadgerCare Plus initiative, and the increased funding and added flexibility approved by Congress ensures that our state can sustain and build upon the gains we have made.”

The bill has been approved by both the House and Senate, but they must now work out minor differences between the two versions of the SCHIP legislation. Final passage is expected next week, and President Obama has vowed to sign the bill.

The new SCHIP legislation will increase the federal investment in affordable coverage for children by \$32.8 billion over the next four and a half years. According to estimates by the Congressional Budget Office, the bill will result in the coverage of an additional 4.1 million children who otherwise would be uninsured.

Eleson said the SCHIP bill contains many provisions that will help Wisconsin. In particular, it will allow Wisconsin to increase the number of children enrolled in BadgerCare Plus whose coverage is funded through the SCHIP program, which pays a higher percentage of the state’s costs than Medicaid. Other provisions that will help the state improve health coverage of Wisconsin children include the following:

- Giving states more options for verifying the identity of applicants, which will help Wisconsin cut the red tape in the enrollment process.
- Providing funding for outreach activities to find and enroll eligible children, which will be very important as more workers lose their jobs and their employer-sponsored insurance.
- Eliminating the waiting period for eligible children who are legal immigrants, who currently must wait five years for coverage, even with conditions like asthma or cancer.
- Providing increased federal funding for states that substantially increase enrollment of lower income children after 2007, as Wisconsin did in 2008.

The full cost of the bill is offset by an increase in the federal cigarette tax. The bill was supported by Senators Kohl and Feingold, and Representatives Baldwin, Kagen, Kind, Moore, Obey and Petri.