

House Democrats Introduce Health Care Plan to Aid Working Families

On March 8, 2006, members of the South Carolina House Democratic Caucus presented their Working Families, Healthy Families program that would provide health care for an estimated 100,000 citizens. With almost three-quarters of a million uninsured people in South Carolina, this plan begins to address the looming health care crisis. "The Working Families, Healthy Families program is an investment in the health and well-being of South Carolinians," stated Democratic Minority Leader Harry Ott. "By working closely with small business and community leaders, we have created a plan that will help aid our children, strengthen our workforce, and keep our small businesses financially competitive."

The Working Families, Healthy Families program seeks to reduce the large number of children currently without health care. The plan increases the coverage of the state's Partners for Healthy Children program (CHIPS) from 150% of poverty to 200%. "We can no longer turn a blind eye toward the fact that almost 150,000 children are uninsured," said Democratic House member Karl Anderson. "This program will give 40,000 children the proper health care they deserve."

The second component of the health plan authorizes a Premium Assistance Program for small businesses that employ 75 people or fewer whose employees and spouses are living at or under 200% of poverty. These business owners will contribute only 25% of the premium costs, while the eligible employees will contribute to the program based on a sliding scale up to 15% of the premium cost.

The remaining premium cost will be paid by the state Medicaid program but will not cut or redistribute funds from existing Medicaid programs. For every two dollars the state spends on this program, there will be a four-dollar match from federal funding.

Funding for the Working Families, Healthy Families program will be generated by raising the cigarette tax by 32 cents per pack, a level that is competitive with Georgia and North Carolina. "Research has shown that citizens support investing in health care because they recognize the long-term benefits to our state," said Democratic Representative Gilda Cobb-Hunter. In addition to voters, support for the plan is also coming from many business, health, and civic organizations including the South Carolina Small Business Chamber of Commerce, the March of Dimes, South Carolina Fair Share, Family Connections of South Carolina, and AARP of South Carolina.

In finishing up his presentation of the Working Families, Healthy Families program, Democratic Representative Paul Agnew said "When you think about the issue, the real question is: do we want cheap cigarettes, or affordable health care? The majority of citizens I've spoken with want health care."

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