

Can children get Congress to protect their health?

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Friday, 30 October 2009 15:20

(NNPA) - In 1931, Grace Abbott, the Chief of the U.S. Children's Bureau, gave a speech about her long and frustrating workdays in our nation's capital trying to advocate for children's needs. She said she felt all alone standing with her baby carriage on the sidewalk watching a great traffic jam moving toward the Capitol where Congress sits.

She saw all kinds of vehicles including the tanks and trucks the Army put into the street; "the handsome limousines in which the Department of Commerce rides...the barouches in which the Department of State rides with such dignity...[and] the noisy patrols in which the Department of Justice officials sometimes appear." And so she stood on the sidewalk watching, "because the responsibility is mine and I must, I take a very firm hold on the handles of the baby carriage and I wheel it into the traffic."

And so must we parents and grandparents and child care providers and educators grab the handles of our baby strollers and the hand of our children and walk into the traffic headed for Congress. We must make them hear and respond to the urgent, but still too ignored, needs of our 8.1 million uninsured children. We must break through the political den of powerful special interests like the insurance and drug companies with their fleet of well paid lobbyists.

On Wednesday, November 4th, the Children's Defense Fund is organizing a Champions for Children's Health Stroller Brigade in the nation's Capitol to send an urgent and clear message to our political leaders that real health reform for children must be enacted this year. Children's unmet health needs have been lost in the debate's "big" issues. Unless we act now, millions of children could be worse, rather than better off, as a result of pending health reform legislation.

D.C.'s stroller brigade will extend to Congressional districts across the country on November 6th through 8th where concerned parents, grandparents, faith, and community leaders will tell members of Congress back home to stand up and invest in an affordable, accessible, and comprehensive child health system. So far, stroller brigades are being planned for Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, and Texas.

It is morally and economically indefensible for millions of American children to be denied critically needed health reform in the richest nation on earth claiming it lacks the money to protect its children.

We need to end the bureaucratic barriers that keep two out of three of the more than eight million uninsured children who are already eligible for either CHIP or Medicaid from actually getting the care they need. A simple, seamless enrollment process like older Americans have for Medicare would ensure our children are cared for and covered. We need to guarantee every child access to the full range of preventive and other health care services they need and that we now provide to all children in Medicaid but not to all children in CHIP or in the proposed Exchange.

A child covered by CHIP has the same value as a child covered by Medicaid and all deserve comprehensive care regardless of the program they are in. And we need to provide an affordable national health safety net for children whose families make up to 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$66,000 for a family of four) and eliminate the unjust lottery of geography. Whether a child's family can afford coverage should not depend on where they live.

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New York covers children up to 400 percent; North Dakota only to 160 percent; and Massachusetts and twenty-one other states, plus the District of Columbia are already at 300 percent. A child in North Dakota is no less valuable than a child in New York or Massachusetts.

The lives and health of millions of children depend on health reform this year. They will not get what they need unless you speak up and demand it. Children have no other voice but yours. Lift it high and loud. Grab your strollers, your scooter, or your walking shoes, and join our children's brigades on November 4th in Washington, D.C. and in other states across the country November 6-8th. In America, every child should have the health care they need – now. They have only one childhood. Together we can make it happen. To learn how to join a stroller brigade, create your own, or take action in other ways with simple steps, visit www.childrensdefense.org/strollerbrigade.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.