

“Legal Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act of 2007 (ICHIA)”

Background

In 2005, more than 3.2 million Latino children did not have access to health coverage for the entire year, representing nearly two-fifths (38.8%) of the uninsured children in the U.S. Latino children often face unique obstacles to gaining access to certain federal health care programs, including Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Federal laws restrict most noncitizens arriving in the U.S. after August 22, 1996 from accessing these programs for the first five years that they reside in the country, simply because they are legal immigrants. The restrictions also deter many eligible family members from participating in Medicaid and SCHIP. Complex laws create confusion around eligibility and induce fears that participating in federal health programs will inhibit future naturalization opportunities for their loved ones.

What is ICHIA?

The “Legal Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act (ICHIA) of 2007” (S. 764, H.R. 1308) takes the first step to ensure equitable access to health care for the nation’s immigrant families, by granting states the option to use federal funds to make Medicaid and SCHIP coverage available to otherwise eligible legal immigrant children and pregnant women. This law would simplify the current restrictions allowing those who are lawfully residing in the U.S. to access vital federal health care services, regardless of their date of entry.

Why is ICHIA important?

ICHIA provides access to health care coverage that is essential to pregnant women and children’s well-being. Health care coverage ensures that critical health services, such as regular check-ups and screenings, and other primary care are accessible, promoting healthy development among children. Lack of access to adequate health care can lead to a lifetime of chronic diseases, such as overweight/obesity or diabetes, which are easily monitored or prevented with sufficient early attention. Currently, Latino children are two times less likely to get all the care that they needed when compared to non-Hispanic Whites, increasing the likelihood of poor health status. In addition, pregnant women are at a much greater risk of developing complications throughout their pregnancy, having a premature child, or one with a low birth weight.

Making sure that more communities are insured is the fiscally-wise choice. Reports show that immigrants are far less likely to use any health care services than their native-born counterparts because of their limited access to health coverage. Many of the uninsured must put off care until they are sick or have aggravated minor health conditions, driving up the risk of costly and unnecessary hospitalizations. Those without health coverage may be forced to seek expensive urgent and emergency care, instead of accessing primary care. To the contrary, investments that enable people to be more proactive in preventing health care complications

yield excellent cost savings. For instance, for every dollar invested in prenatal care \$3 are saved, as estimated by the Academy of Sciences.

States need consistent funding to meet the needs of their populations. Realizing the value of ensuring health care for many who live in the U.S., more than one-third of states are already using their own funds to provide coverage to legal immigrants who are ineligible for federal Medicaid or SCHIP. ICHIA would provide important fiscal relief and flexibility to these states, some of which already have tight budgets.

NCLR's Position

Long overdue is a repeal of the bars that contribute to Latino children having the highest uninsurance rate of any ethnic group in the U.S. (21.9%). The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) urges Congress to take immediate steps to pass the "Legal Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act." If Congress is serious about improving health coverage for the millions of uninsured children throughout the U.S., it will make a commitment in the 2007 SCHIP reauthorization to cover legal immigrant children and women who have been arbitrarily left behind. Investing in improved health coverage for legal immigrant children and pregnant women is crucial to their good health and it benefits the entire country.