

# Obama signs bill expanding children's health coverage

Staff and wire report

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama signed a bill Wednesday extending health coverage to 4 million uninsured children, a much-needed win a day after he lost his nominee to lead his drive for sweeping health care reform.

"This is good. This is good," a smiling Obama said as he entered the East Room for the packed, ebullient signing ceremony.

The bill went to the White House fresh from passage in the Democratic-controlled House, on a vote of 290-135. Forty Republicans joined in approval.

The bill calls for spending an additional \$32.8 billion on the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, which now enrolls an estimated 7 million children. Lawmakers generated that revenue by raising the federal tobacco tax.

Obama said adding 4 million children to the program was a key step toward his promise of

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universal health care coverage for all.

Republicans criticized the cost of the legislation. They also said it will mean an estimated 2.4 million children who otherwise would have access to private insurance will join the State Children's Health Insurance Program instead.

"The Democrats continue to push their government-run health care agenda — universal coverage, as they call it," said Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Texas.

Advocates in Santa Cruz County, hailed the move.

"This is terrific news and represents a real sea change out of Washington," said Leslie Conner of Healthy Kids of Santa Cruz

County, a local health insurance program for children in low-income households. "There are about 6,000 Santa Cruz County kids currently enrolled in the Healthy Families program which is funded by SCHIP, so their coverage is now secure. Local support for healthy kids today, plus getting all California kids covered over the long term, is absolutely critical especially given our nation's economic crisis."

Her program will work to enroll 2,000 local children whose families don't qualify for Healthy Families.

Marielena Hincapié of the National Immigration Law Center applauded the bill for removing the five-year waiting period for many legal immigrant children and pregnant women to get health coverage.

The bill's passage has long been a top priority of Democratic lawmakers. In late 2007, President George W. Bush twice vetoed similar bills. Obama made it a

top priority in his first 100 days and one step in his push for universal coverage by the end of his first term.

"President Obama and Congress are demonstrating that change has come to Washington, and we are moving forward to improve the quality of life for American families struggling during these hard times," said Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

SCHIP was created more than a decade ago to help children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but too low to afford private coverage.

Federal money for the program was set to expire March 31, barring action by Congress. To cover the increase in spending, the bill would boost the federal excise tax on a pack of cigarettes by 62 cents, to \$1.01 a pack.

Opponents of the bill complained that the tobacco tax increase hits the poor the hardest.

## DETAILS OF THE BILL

- Expands coverage for another 4.1 million uninsured children.
- Provides an additional \$32.8 billion through Sept. 30, 2013, by increasing federal excise taxes on tobacco products. The tax on cigarettes will go up 62 cents to \$1.01 a pack.
- Provides \$100 million in grants for states, local governments, schools and others to enroll more eligible children.
- Requires states to offer a dental benefit.
- Allows states to offer SCHIP dental coverage to children whose private medical insurance does not cover dentist visits.
- Allows states to extend SCHIP and Medicaid to newly arrived legal immigrant children and pregnant women.
- Allows states to use Social Security numbers to verify an applicant's citizenship, making it easier to prove eligibility and enroll in the program.