

## Healthy Families and Strong Businesses

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Last March I wrote about the Democratic plan to provide health insurance to thousands of South Carolinians who are uninsured. The majority of the uninsured are working people and children of working people. While the plan did not pass last year, there has been some movement that makes me hopeful that we will see some progress this session.

The Democratic agenda for health care is two-fold. First, for many years the Democrats have been fighting to expand the state's Children's Health Insurance Plan (S-CHIP) to cover children whose families' income falls below 200 percent of federal poverty level. Currently, South Carolina only provides coverage for children whose families' income fall below 150 percent of poverty level. As a result, an estimated 102,000 children, almost 1 out of every 10 children in this state, is uninsured.

According to the Kids Count Data Book, South Carolina ranks 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation in terms of the health and quality of life of our children. In addition, being uninsured has serious health consequences for children. According to the South Carolina Hospital Association, uninsured children are: three times more likely to have had no doctor visits in the past year; two times more likely to have had no well-child visit in the past year; 13 times more likely to have no usual source of care; and five times more likely to have an unmet dental or vision need.

It is estimated that an additional 60,000 to 76,000 children in our state can be insured with this plan. The money for this increase would come from the general fund, and from the federal government's matching program that provides four dollars for every dollar the state puts into the S-CHIP program.

The House Ways and Means Committee is examining this issue more closely this year and will, I hope, approve a plan to address this important need. This investment in the children of South Carolina will yield returns in the form of healthier children who are more prepared to learn in school and successfully meet the challenges of life.

The second part of the plan is the Healthy Families and Strong Businesses Act. According to the South Carolina Department of Insurance, an estimated 800,000 SC citizens are without health insurance. This health care crisis is slowing our economy and costing our state dearly. Many of the uninsured seek medical attention in emergency rooms and many wait until they reach a medical crisis. A portion of the costs of treating the uninsured is paid out of tax dollars. The rest of the cost is shifted to South Carolinians and their employers through increased premiums. Managed care and treatment through affordable health insurance will create a healthier workforce, control diseases and illnesses before they are life-threatening, and save our state and its citizens millions in prevented costs.

Nearly 70 percent of uninsured South Carolinians live in households where at least one person works full time. The Healthy Families and Strong Businesses Act would assist our small businesses in providing health insurance to an estimated 173,675 employees across the state. This plan would be paid for by a 30-cent increase in the cigarette tax. With the national average at roughly \$1 per pack, South Carolina's tax of 7 cents per pack is the lowest in the nation and has not been changed since 1977.

Last session, the House refused to increase the cigarette tax. This year, however, the Governor has proposed raising the cigarette tax by 30 cents. House Democrats hope that, should an increase in the cigarette tax pass, the revenue will be spent on alleviating the health care needs in our state through the Healthy Families and Strong Businesses Act. Additionally, it has been shown that an increase in the cost of cigarettes will deter young people from ever picking up the habit of smoking.

I hope that this is the year that South Carolina will make the investment in the future of children and in our economy by helping our working citizens and small businesses better able to afford health care. The health of our families and businesses should be more important than cheap cigarettes.