



## The Patriot-News

AS I SEE IT JOAN BENSO

### Parents' requests to Santa would cover kids' health care

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While video games, snowboards and dolls are likely to be on many kids' Christmas lists this year, just imagine what would happen if American parents could make some requests of Santa. They might be asking for a stable job that allows them to pay their rent or mortgage and keep food on the table; better health care for their children; reliable child care that fosters early learning, and a few extra dollars to assure that there are gifts under the tree.

This holiday season finds Pennsylvania's families wishing to fulfill basic needs. And, let us not forget, the vast majority of poor Americans are children.

Experts say the unemployment rate could rise to nine percent the last quarter of 2009. More unemployment means more jobless people, more people without health care and an increase, ultimately, in the number of children in need. More than one-third of Pennsylvania children already live below 200 percent of poverty while more than 200,000 children here live in deep poverty.

Pennsylvania, like 43 other states, faces budget shortfalls for this year and/or next year. In our case, the estimate is as high as a \$1.6 billion shortfall at the conclusion of the fiscal year June 30. Because states generally must pass balanced budgets, the slowdown in revenues and the increased demand for safety net programs will force many states to make difficult choices in the months ahead.

The 111th Congress, which convenes in January, must act quickly to pass economic recovery legislation to help families and state governments deal with the recession. The legislation must provide well-designed economic stimulus and relief for low-income children and households hit hardest by the recession. It must include measures that will help stave off large increases in severe poverty and that most effectively stimulate the economy.

A minimum of \$100 billion must be provided to the states over the next two years. The lion's share of state fiscal relief should come through a temporary increase in the federal share of Medicaid funding. This will provide states with funds to meet rising health care costs and protect Medicaid coverage for eligible children, elderly, people with disabilities and others. The enhanced federal share of Medicaid should also extend to the matching rate for federal child welfare funding. Congress also should include in the recovery legislation increases in critical federal programs such as food stamps, unemployment insurance, child care assistance, housing vouchers and more.

Congress must take decisive action to reauthorize the State Children's Health Insurance Program. SCHIP provides general programmatic guidance and funding for state CHIP programs. Parents who are in the eye of the current economic storm need the assurance that their children are covered with health insurance. And Pennsylvania needs the assurance that the federal plan will continue to support CHIP, a successful partnership between the federal and state governments.

Children who have health insurance coverage are more likely to be immunized, to have an ongoing relationship with a primary care physician and to receive appropriate care for chronic medical conditions. In addition, health coverage is strongly linked to academic success. Congress passed reauthorization bills with strong bipartisan majorities in 2007, but they were ultimately vetoed. The vetoed bills must be considered and enacted, with a few improvements, before the program expires March 31.

Once immediate and pressing concerns like the recession and the expiration of SCHIP have been addressed, we need Congress to improve and enhance critical domestic programs that provide for the well-being of America's children. Indeed investing in children's well-being today is vital for the long-term

health of our communities and our economy of tomorrow.

Government must focus on investment areas including child abuse prevention and family strengthening; early care and education such as child care, pre-K and Head Start that help kids get on the right track academically; and support programs that keep students in school and prepare youth for school, work and life.

In addition, Congress should support proposals to create and improve well-designed refundable tax credits that aid working households -- proposals that support children and encourage work, saving, and higher education.

When the family is weakened, children suffer. But strong families mean strong, safe and secure children. Let's work quickly and responsibly to provide relief and security to Pennsylvania's families. It will be a much happier and healthier holiday season for all.

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