

The bill, referred to as SCHIP, is set to expire on Sept. 30. Over the next three months, Congress is expected to debate the issue of providing necessary funding to support “the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society, said Kathy Curran, spokesperson for Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA,) in a February statement.

Citing Pope John Paul II’s call to provide, care for and nurture children, she noted in a February statement that SCHIP “plays an important role in ensuring that low-income children have access to health care coverage. At present, the program covers children who do not qualify for Medicaid because their family income is too high. More than 4 million children are now enrolled in SCHIP.”

Although Congress and Bush both agree that the program deserves reauthorization, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB,) CCUSA and numerous health care organizations, including the American National Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American College of Physicians to name a few, have petitioned for a minimum of \$50 billion in new funds for SCHIP and Medicaid allowed for in the congressional budget resolution. Bush, on the other hand, is proposing a \$2.7 billion cutback of funds.

Robin Rudowitz, a policy analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based Kaiser Family Foundation, an organization which boasts of its lack of political affiliation, explained in a July 5 telephone interview with Ann Piasecki, JPIC coordinator, that the health care industry has expressed concerns about the fate of SCHIP. First, health care affiliates fear Bush’s proposed reductions would impact the public’s health, and in a petition sent to Congress, they cautioned Democrats identified with a group seeking to redirect funds for self-serving purposes to keep in mind the public welfare.

Senators Billy Tauzin, R-LA, and John Dingell, D-Mich., introduced a bipartisan compromise proposal, HR 531, to extend the “availability” of SCHIP funds, enabling states to customize eligibility requirements. Because approximately 11 states have extended the program to cover not only pregnant mothers but also the parents of children enrolled in the program, Rudowitz said the Bush administration has led a move to slash the program. Republicans are also under pressure to support free-market reform of employer-based health insurance systems.

Meanwhile, Michael Leavitt, secretary of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, stands behind the administration’s proposed cuts. Referring to the program as one rooted in providing accessible, affordable healthcare for low-income and middle income children, he decried the program’s spread to adults in a press release.

Responding to the program’s critics, Rudowitz noted that approximately 300,000 of the total 4.8 million enrollees are adults. Those adults ultimately enrolled in the program are from states that had already designated significant funds for child health care, such as Minnesota. Furthermore, she said, parent and child enrollments go hand-in-hand because it eliminates multiple visits to facilities at various sites.