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# Alabama health care providers uneasy about CHIP, health center funding

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Alabama health care providers and advocates are growing uneasy as work on renewing a popular children's insurance program appears to have stalled in Congress.



In 2011, Congress promised to go on the wagon when it came to pork. That didn't last long. (Photo: Stefan Zaklin/Getty Images)

Legislators missed a Sept. 30 deadline to renew funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provides coverage to about 150,000 Alabama children statewide. That, combined with [missed deadlines for community health center funding](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/2017/09/28/congress-must-act-weekend-9-millimmunity-health-center-funding-runs-out-weekend-if-congress-fails-ac/710310001/) ([/story/news/politics/2017/09/28/congress-must-act-weekend-9-millimmunity-health-center-funding-runs-out-weekend-if-congress-fails-ac/710310001/](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/2017/09/28/congress-must-act-weekend-9-millimmunity-health-center-funding-runs-out-weekend-if-congress-fails-ac/710310001/)), could leave thousands of vulnerable Alabamians in trouble.

"We have been scared about this for the past month," said Dr. Vanosia Faison, chief medical officer for Montgomery-based Health Services Inc., which has treated about 35,000 people throughout the state. "Patients have no idea what is at stake."

CHIP provides insurance for children up to age 19 whose households make up to 312 percent of the poverty line – up to \$50,688 a year for a household of two, and up to \$63,710 for a household of three. Qualifying families pay premiums – ranging from \$52 to \$104 per child per year, depending on income – as well as co-pays. ALL Kids, administered by the Alabama Department of Public Health, covers about 83,000 children, while about 70,000 CHIP recipients fall under Alabama Medicaid.

The program covers about 9 million children in the country, and studies credit it with a steep decline in the number of uninsured children in the country. CHIP has been particularly successful in Alabama. A [2014 study](http://www.southunionstreet.com/story/southunionstreet/2014/11/06/alabama-gets-high-marks-on-childrens-health-insurance/18604165/) ([/story/southunionstreet/2014/11/06/alabama-gets-high-marks-on-childrens-health-insurance/18604165/](http://www.southunionstreet.com/story/southunionstreet/2014/11/06/alabama-gets-high-marks-on-childrens-health-insurance/18604165/)) credited CHIP with reducing the number of uninsured children in Alabama 18 percent between 2011 and 2014.

“The benefits package for children is very comprehensive,” said Dr. Wes Stubblefield, a Florence pediatrician and president of the Alabama chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “It’s everything recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics that’s recommended as a standard of care for children for preventative care.”

Bills to renew the program have moved out of House and Senate committees in Congress, but drawn some controversy. The House version funds the CHIP program by charging seniors making more than \$500,000 a year higher Medicare premiums and transferring money from an Affordable Care Act program aimed at prevention and public health.

Alabama’s program has funds to continue through March, though some states may lose all their funding by December. ADPH officials said earlier this month that if the program is dying, notices will go out to families starting in November. Teela Sanders, deputy director of ALL Kids, said Monday they had not gotten any updates on CHIP’s status.

“We’re sitting here waiting,” she said.

The program does have the support of local representatives. Rep. Terri Sewell, D-Birmingham, said in a statement Monday that she wanted a vote to extend CHIP “without slashing vital health programs.”



*(Photo: Yuri Arcurs, Getty Images/Hemera)*

“As hospitals in my district face closure and Alabama families struggle to pay for doctor visits, cutting funds from one health program to keep another on life support is a losing strategy,” the statement said.

Republicans in the local delegation support the renewal of the program, though they spoke less about the details than Sewell. Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Anniston, said in a statement that he had “long supported CHIP.”

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"Alabama is one of the most efficient and well-managed users of CHIP in the nation," the statement said. "I am hopeful the chairmen of the committees of jurisdiction can make a fiscally responsible deal that comes before the full House of Representatives."

Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, believes that "CHIP needs to be reauthorized," according to Todd Stacy, a spokesman for Roby.

"Though she does not serve on the committee negotiating details of the bill, Rep. Roby believes that the best, most responsible policy is one that ensures fiscal sustainability in the years to come," Stacy said in a statement.

In a statement, Democratic Senate nominee Doug Jones' campaign said the stalemate over CHIP was "why Alabamians are so fed up with Washington politicians."

"Politicians are trying to score cheap political points when we should be bolstering programs that provide health care to children and working to reduce health care costs," the statement said.

A spokesman for Republican Senate nominee Roy Moore's campaign said they expected to have a statement Monday evening. The campaign had not released a statement as of late Monday evening.

Stubblefield said they are trying to stress the large amount of support CHIP has in the hopes of moving the needle toward renewal.

"The main thing we've tried to focus on is that the CHIP program has always been a popular bipartisan program, popular among families, popular among providers and popular among lawmakers," he said. "It's heartbreaking the lawmakers can't come up with a way to fund this program."

The community health center cuts would also hurt Health Services in Montgomery. Faison said that staff members have been asked to detail the cuts they might make in the face of severe cuts.

"We're facing a 70 percent budget cut," she said. "We have to look at what will we have to do if we have to cut our budget 70 percent."

Jim Carnes, policy director for Alabama Arise, which lobbies on issues affecting low-income people, said Monday he believed that Congress would reauthorize the program, but said legislators were leaving far too many people in the lurch.

"This delay is inexcusable," he said. "They had every opportunity to meet the deadline."

Stubblefield agreed, saying the instability with CHIP reminded him of Alabama's almost annual fights over Medicaid funding, critical to the health care infrastructure of the state.

"We need certainty," he said. "We need certainty from the state and federal governments. It's just more uncertainty for us."

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