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By U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire

(Washington, DC) - Earlier this month, the new Congress delivered on its commitment to improve health-care accessibility by passing the Children's Health and Medicare Protection Act. CHAMP strengthens Medicare, provides health care to millions of children in working families and includes a provision that I authored to provide relief to millions of senior citizens. I worked hard to pass this critical initiative because I believe that there are few more important issues for Congress to address than improving access to quality, affordable health care for our seniors and working families.

The CHAMP Act strengthens Medicare for its 44 million beneficiaries. It eliminates co-payments for preventive health-care services and fixes a scheduled 10 percent reimbursement cut for physicians. If left unresolved, the physician cut could have driven thousands of doctors out of the Medicare program. The act also protects Western Pennsylvania's Medicare Advantage programs by ensuring that private Medicare plans will be reimbursed at the same rates as all other Medicare providers. These changes extend the life of the Medicare Trust Fund for three years and guarantee continued access to health care for all Medicare beneficiaries. Seniors will maintain access to their Medicare plans and doctors of their choice.

CHAMP complements Pennsylvania's successful children's health-care program through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, commonly known as S-CHIP. The bill that passed in the U.S. House will protect coverage for the 188,000 Pennsylvania children already in the program and help cover an additional 78,000 children who currently qualify but are not yet enrolled. Nationwide, there are more than 5 million children who meet the income threshold to qualify for the federal children's health-care program but are not enrolled. The majority of these children live in families in which the head of the household is employed but cannot afford health care. These families work hard and play by the rules, and the CHAMP Act finally helps them provide health care for their children.

I am particularly proud that legislation I introduced was included in the bill. In March, I proposed legislation to eliminate the late enrollment penalty for beneficiaries enrolling in Medicare Part D, which is the new prescription drug program. This late-enrollment penalty has been identified as an unfair barrier to drug coverage for more than 3 million seniors, including thousands in Western Pennsylvania.

After introducing my bill, I worked tirelessly over the succeeding months to make sure that this was included in CHAMP. By including this provision, Congress is helping low-income seniors to access the Medicare Part D prescription drug program without penalty.

The budget that President Bush submitted to Congress this year would have underfunded S-CHIP, cutting more than 1 million children from the existing program. So it is not surprising that he has threatened to veto the CHAMP Act. He justifies his threat by claiming, paradoxically, that the bill is both a move toward a federalized health-care system and a cut to Medicare. Neither could be further from the truth.

The S-CHIP program has already been in existence for 10 years, but is set to expire on Sept. 30. The CHAMP Act simply reauthorizes the existing program and provides coverage to the 5 million children who already qualify for the program but are not yet enrolled. The program remains a capped block grant administered by the states, nearly all of which contract out the program through the private insurance market. This is hardly a federal government takeover of health care.

The Medicare provisions in CHAMP improve health-care access for all senior citizens by keeping physicians in the program. The bill ensures fair and reasonable reimbursement rates for all Medicare providers and contractors, including the private insurance plans that participate in the Medicare Advantage program. Equally important, the bill strengthens the Medicare Trust Fund by extending its projected life span by three years. That is why this bill was endorsed by AARP and the American Medical Association, as well as 60 other organizations.

President Bush says there are clear differences between Congress and the White House on our health-care priorities, and he is right. Through his veto threat, the president stubbornly insists on his own proposal that would actually decrease the number of covered children by 1 million. Congress instead made the tough choices and found a budget-neutral way to increase coverage by 5 million children and ensure continued access to Medicare for every senior citizen -- all without adding one penny to the federal deficit.

Only time will tell whether the CHAMP Act will survive the president's veto. Nevertheless, I am proud of the action the U.S. House has taken and look forward to continuing the debate on ensuring access to affordable health care for working families and senior citizens in Western

Pennsylvania and around the nation.