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by Heidi Schlumpf

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(Unsplash/Hush Naidoo)

It took years for Dakota Flores to get the correct medications to effectively treat her 13-year-old son's ADHD, but they finally helped turn him from an angry child who was failing in school to a strong student in advanced-placement history and science classes, a member of the honor choir and a bass drummer in an award-winning drum corp.

But now the single mother of four is worried that her son may lose access to those medications, since she purchases his health insurance through the government-subsidized Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP. The program also assists with health insurance for her 11-year-old daughter, who has severe vision problems.

The state-administered program, which provides low-cost health insurance for 9 million children nationwide, lost its federal funding on Sept. 30, when it was not renewed. The [short-term spending bill](#) passed by Congress before the holiday recess includes \$3 billion to help keep the program alive until March, but some states have already informed parents that they may lose their kids' insurance.

So Flores is spending her kids' holiday break running them to doctor's appointments and getting their prescriptions filled — and trying to figure out what she will do if CHIP gets cut. Her only option seems to be to quit her \$10-an-hour job at a pawn shop in San Antonio, or to decrease her hours, so her children will qualify for Medicaid.

"But then we wouldn't make ends meet, which we barely are now," said Flores, who does not receive any health insurance benefits through her employer. Her own insurance premiums through the Affordable Care Act network are about to skyrocket because she no longer qualifies for assistance. "But that's not my concern; my concern is my kids," she said.

CHIP had bipartisan support in the past, but now seems caught in political fighting about how to fund it. Republicans want to pay for the program with cuts to Medicaid, (called "pay-fors") while Democrats oppose such cuts.

The U.S. bishops called on Congress to reauthorize the program in October, in a [letter to legislators](#) that quoted Pope Francis, who has called health care "a human right" not a "consumer good."

"CHIP has been a reliable source of coverage for low-income children in working families whose parents earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but too little to afford private health insurance," said the Oct. 4 letter, signed by Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, who is chair of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Dewane also noted that since 2009, expansions of Medicaid and CHIP have helped to reduce the children's uninsured rate to a record low of 5 percent.

The lack of funding for CHIP is not directly related to the tax overhaul bill, which was Congress' focus during December, but it "shows the agenda of the GOP, principally in the House, to give tax breaks to the wealthy and not support families in need," said Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobbying organization.

Reauthorizing CHIP "is an easy thing to do," Campbell told NCR, "especially in this season that is all about caring for our children. It's shocking that we as a nation aren't keeping our promise to kids."

NETWORK was among several [Catholic groups who joined an interfaith effort in September urging reauthorization of CHIP funding](#) as "part of our sacred obligation to care for one another."

"While we come from different faith traditions, we share a moral vision of a health care system that offers health, wholeness and human dignity for all. Our scriptures and sacred teachings inspire a special concern for those experiencing vulnerability, such as children," said the Sept. 6 letter from 28 Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith organizations.

"We believe that no family should have to face the terrible decision between putting food on the table, paying rent, or providing health coverage for their child," the letter said.

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That's exactly the choice facing Flores and other families that rely on CHIP.

Connie Cavara already works as much overtime as she can as a nurse at a nursing home in Pittsburgh. Although her job offers affordable health insurance for her, adding her children would eat up about 40 percent of her monthly take-home pay. CHIP provides affordable health insurance for her two children; a third with mental health disabilities qualifies for Medicaid.

Cavara would have to get a second job to pay for her children's health insurance without CHIP. "I'm fortunate that my kids are pretty healthy," she said.

But when she was pregnant with her now-4-year-old daughter, doctors found a mass on the baby's adrenal gland. Although the mass is not cancerous and seems to be shrinking on its own, the testing was covered by her health insurance subsidized by CHIP.

"It was really a lifesaver," said Cavara. "When you're worried about a health problem with your child, you don't want to worry about how you're going to pay for it, too."



(Medicaid.gov)

Cavara said she is confused by so-called "prolife" politicians who don't support children once they are born. "I think if you're going to be prolife, you need to fund reasonable health care and other programs that help mothers raise their children," she said. "These are children's lives we're talking about."

Flores is angry that her own senator, Ted Cruz (a Republican who is [seen by many Catholics as prolife](#))\*, was not available to meet with her about CHIP when she went to Washington, D.C., in December as part of delegation from the Children's Defense Fund.

Cruz also did not vote for the short-term spending bill, which will carry CHIP for a few months. The temporary fix, Flores said, is "a Band-Aid on a gushing wound" and one that gives families no answers about the rest of the year.

As she shares the stories of other families she met in Washington — some whose children face serious and life-threatening issues — Flores begins to cry. Although their children's health issues differed, the families unfortunately shared the same anxiety and fear. Said Flores, "There were a lot of red eyes."

*\* An earlier version of this article misstated Sen. Ted Cruz's religious affiliation.*

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