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BY U.S. REP. JOHN MURTHA

In the past seven years, President Bush has vetoed only four pieces of legislation, fewer than any president since James Garfield occupied the White House more than 125 years ago.

Yet this month, Bush chose to veto the bipartisan Children's Health Insurance Bill, which would provide health insurance to 10 million low-income children, because, he said, it "moves our health-care system in the wrong direction."

I disagree.

The program was established in 1997 to provide health-care coverage for children in families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to afford private insurance. Currently, more than 6 million low-income children are covered by the program, including more than 164,000 in Pennsylvania.

The bipartisan bill that Congress sent to the president ensures that these 6 million children continue to receive health-care coverage. It also extends coverage to an additional 4 million children who currently lack health insurance.

The bill has broad support from Democrats and Republicans, and a clear majority of Americans. Additionally, 29 governors and more than 270 independent organizations, including the American Medical Association, AARP, United Way of America and YMCA, support the bill.

Part of the opposition stems from an additional \$35 billion invested over five years to strengthen the quality of health care these children receive. I believe that if we can afford to spend more than \$10 billion every month in Iraq, we certainly had better be able to spend \$7 billion more a year to provide our children at home with the health coverage they deserve.

Contrary to what some would like you to believe, the bill actually includes language that blocks illegal residents from receiving these benefits.

Still, some would rather see Congress just extend the current program through 2009, ignoring the reality that there are millions of additional children who lack health coverage and are not covered under the existing program.

I believe that to simply reject the health-care needs of these children with a veto pen is irresponsible and wrong.

It's also worth pointing out that the bill extends the Family and Medical Leave Act to include the family members of our wounded veterans. Family members would be permitted, under the law, to take up to six months of unpaid leave from their jobs to care for injured veterans without fear of losing their jobs.

Our military men and women and their families have sacrificed enough. They shouldn't also have to sacrifice the career of the person who may in some cases become the family's main breadwinner.

This week, Congress has an opportunity to fix Bush's veto mistake. I will vote to override his veto because I believe that providing our children with the health care they need is in fact the right direction to take.

U.S. Rep. John Murtha serves the 12th Congressional District, which includes parts of Cambria and Somerset counties.