

Headlines from the Hill

Supporting our children's access to quality health care and our nurses

By Rep. Lois Capps, RN (D-CA)

OFTEN I AM ASKED how my experience as a registered nurse is relevant to my work in Congress. I usually explain that being a nurse instilled in me vital listening and analytical skills that are invaluable assets when making policy or political decisions. My work as a nurse also gives me a unique perspective and credibility with my colleagues on healthcare policy. I regularly find myself dispensing advice to my colleagues on how to vote when Congress considers healthcare legislation.

Given the number of health care issues that we expect to address in the 110th Congress, I am very hopeful that my insights will be particularly helpful in this Congressional session. At the top of the legislative priority list is addressing issues related to children's health. In the coming months, Congress will be taking up reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Congress' commitment to addressing this critical issue is evident in the fact that the first hearing of the 110th Congress held by the Energy and Commerce Committee's Health Subcommittee, on which I serve, was to discuss the importance of children's access to healthcare coverage. I believe this will be one of the most important pieces of legislation where I can use my expertise as a school nurse to drive public policy on an issue so close to my heart.

Very soon into our first hearing on children's access to health care, we delved into the issue of who provides health care to children who lack coverage. I was able to speak firsthand about how school nurses become primary caregivers to children whose families are uninsured. The rising numbers of uninsured children puts a strain on school nurses because it happens simultaneously with the increased incidence of students with chronic conditions and complicated comorbidities. School nurses are often left with few resources to provide both primary care services and necessary support services to every student who deserves them. Furthermore, school nurses are not equipped to deal with certain primary care needs,

such as dental care and mental health. It is heart-breaking to watch a child begin to lag behind in school because he or she has developed a preventable disease.

This, of course, highlights another barrier to quality health care in our nation—the critical shortage of nurses, including a lack of school nurses. We are in a dire situation in which more students require attention but fewer nurses are available to provide care. As I noted at our Health Subcommittee's hearing, the school nurse is practically an endangered species these days.



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Tragically, the lack of school nurses is only one element of the overall nursing shortage facing our country, which grows worse with each passing day. With the support of the ANA and other nursing associations, I am committed to raising the profile of our profession and raising awareness about the nursing shortage as we proceed with SCHIP reauthorization and our quest to provide the best quality care to our nation's children. ★

Lois Capps, RN, has been a member of the U.S. Congress since 1998. She serves on the Committee on Energy and Commerce and its subcommittees on Health, Telecommunications and the Internet, and Environment and Hazardous Materials. She is also founder and co-chair of the House Nursing Caucus and serves as co-chair of the Congressional Heart and Stroke Coalition, the House Cancer Caucus, the Congressional School Health and Safety Caucus, the Congressional Hearing Health Caucus, and the House Democratic Task Force on Health.