

Doctors and Students Call Out to Congress: Reauthorize CHIP Now

Students from the University of Chicago – Pritzker School of Medicine organized a downtown rally on Thursday, December 14 calling on Congress to reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for more than 250,000 Illinois children who rely on it. One of the organizers is Pritzker M3 Eric Sullivan, an IAFP member and a participant in the Family Health Foundation's [Mentor Connections](#) program, where he is paired with IAFP volunteer leader Margaret Kirkegaard, MD.



Sullivan opened the rally with an impassioned plea to Congress.

"We [students] are not doctors yet, the oath that we take when they give us these white coats obligates us to advocate on behalf of our current and future patients," Sullivan rallied the cold but vocal crowd of students from several Chicago medical schools - clad and shivering in their white coats. "Keeping kids healthy shouldn't be a bi-partisan priority. It should be a non-partisan priority."

The rally was covered by at least three local television stations and caught the attention of passers-by during the lunch hour.

IAFP board member Tina Wheat, MD – medical director for Erie Family Health Center in Humboldt Park, was the final featured speaker, representing Erie. Nearly half of the 70,000 patients in the Erie system are children, many of them currently rely on CHIP for coverage, which could run out next year without Federal funding. After the rally, Wheat was interviewed, in Spanish, but both Telemundo and Univision TV crews.

Below are Dr. Wheat's full remarks:



"Good afternoon - I am Tina Wheat and I am a doctor at Erie Family Health Center and the medical director of our Humboldt Park location. Erie serves patients regardless of their ability to pay at 13 sites across Chicago and in the northern suburbs. Close to half of our 70,000 patients are children and thousands of those children are covered through the Children's Health Insurance Program. Because of CHIP, they are among the more than a quarter of a million children across Illinois who today can access the critical preventive and acute care that they need.

At Erie and other community health centers we will serve anyone who comes through our doors, regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay. And we will continue to provide primary care if CHIP goes away. However we are just one part of the safety net for young children. Without CHIP, our patients' won't be able to access the specialty services or prescriptions many of them need.

Consider Roberto - Roberto is a 14 year old patient who we were seeing for primary care who started having seizures. Because he had CHIP, he was able to get an MRI, which determined he had a brain tumor. He was then able to get the brain tumor removed and go back to living his life - going to school, hanging out with friends, playing sports. Fortunately because he had a primary care provider the family knew and trusted AND he had CHIP his story had a happy ending.

Also consider Angel. I am the doctor for Angel, his sister and his mother. Angel has asthma - a common problem for children in the city. At the age of 6 when I became his doctor, he had already had several trips to the Emergency Room for problems with his asthma. We now have him on several medications and he is finally under control and able to fully participate with other

children his age. And because his asthma is now controlled with medications, he has not gone to the emergency room for over a year.

Regardless of what happens with CHIP, we will keep caring for kids like Roberto and Angel. But without CHIP many primary care providers will NOT. This means increased strain on other safety net providers and more difficulty for families to access preventive services. Families will have long wait times to see their primary doctors and even longer wait times to see specialists. They may even have to choose between paying for much needed medications, vaccines to prevent illness and allow them to attend school, and healthy foods to eat. As a mother, I cannot imagine having to make such hard choices.

And without CHIP, our state runs the risk of losing close to half a billion dollars - critically needed in this already cash-strapped time for Illinois. Taken together Congressional inaction is not only wasteful and inefficient - it's inhumane. The time to act is now for Roberto, Angel and the 250,000 more children of this state. Call all of your members of Congress today and say that they can't delay any longer and to re-authorize CHIP funding."