

Op-Ed

All children should have health care, including the undocumented

By JULIA ROSENBERG, MD

MAR 22, 2019 | 8:00 AM

When I embarked on a career as a pediatrician, I had a simple mission: I wanted to provide compassionate care to poor children and families. I was heartbroken when I learned that this goal of being available to care for vulnerable children was not so simple. More than 10,000 Connecticut children did not qualify to walk through the doors of our clinic: undocumented children, none of whom are eligible for state Medicaid.

In Connecticut, these children, who have often endured trauma and have specialized healthcare needs, do not have a guaranteed path to health insurance. In New York, where I trained in medical school, all children, documented or not, are eligible for health insurance. But here in Connecticut, like in most of the United States, undocumented children do not qualify for Medicaid. That leaves hundreds of thousands of children, thousands in Connecticut alone, without health insurance.

Countless studies have shown why children need health insurance. Without it, children's short-term and long-term health suffers. Pediatric patients with continuous health insurance coverage are more likely to be physically healthy and are more likely to excel. Compared to their uninsured peers, insured children avoid risky behaviors (like drug and alcohol use), do better in school, and have successful careers. Insured children also become healthier adults, with fewer costly and painful chronic conditions.

Children need the services that doctors and nurses provide. As a pediatrician, I partner with parents to guide children through every milestone as they grow up. During yearly check-ups and visits to address any medical concerns, I also provide screening and guidance that can save lives. Pediatricians' prompt identification of developmental delays and mental health disorders can lead to early diagnosis and effective treatments. This, in turn, prevents costly — and sometimes dangerous—ramifications, from debilitating diseases to violent outbursts.

Our role as health care providers expands far beyond the clinic walls. Parents often turn to clinicians to connect them to school services and community resources. The relationship built from consistent, reliable care can reduce unnecessary and expensive emergency room visits, hospitalizations and preventable illnesses.

But these vital benefits only apply to children with insurance.

Uninsured children are much less likely to have a regular doctor and do not have access to the many resources physicians provide. For the many undocumented children without insurance who have already faced significant trauma, serious problems may only come to medical or educational attention when it's too late. A host of entirely preventable issues — from asthma attacks to delays in development — result in a host of entirely avoidable consequences, from hospitalizations to permanent disabilities.

Insuring all children is an up-front investment that will ultimately result in a brighter and healthier future for Connecticut's next generations. Several states, including Massachusetts and New York, have already seen the value in this investment by enacting legislation to expand health care access to all children.

This legislative session, Connecticut has the opportunity to join these states by providing undocumented children the healthcare they need. Senate Bill 1053 would expand Medicaid and Husky B coverage to all children, regardless of their immigration status, and in turn would allow about 15,000 previously ineligible children to apply for health insurance coverage.

Passage of this bill will benefit not only Connecticut's children but also the health and well-being of our state and its future.

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