

SBHC Champions New Congressional Leaders

With the balance of power tipped toward Congressional Democrats, school health care providers and advocates may rightly wonder if the time is nigh for Congress-come-lately to join the long list of governors, legislatures and local policy makers who have invested public resources in school health centers. Since the National Assembly's beginnings in 1995, Republicans have controlled the US House of Representatives. Until November 8, the House Energy and Commerce committee was not a particularly friendly environment for advancing progressive children's health policies, to say nothing of school health centers. Conservative committee leaders who tightly controlled the health agenda weren't interested in our seemingly nonpartisan solution for eliminating health access inequities and giving children a greater chance for good health and school success.

Suddenly, (and amazingly) the prospects of federal support for school health care are brighter. Congressional Democratic leaders who easily could be described as school health champions will soon find themselves well positioned to flex a little political muscle on behalf of NASBHC for an amply funded school health center program authorization.

Health Care Access Policy. Chief leaders in the U.S. House and Senate who will determine if and when any school-based health center legislative action occurs are well regarded children and youth advocates. Rep. John Dingell (MI) will chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Rep. Dingell was one of four sponsors of last year's SBHC earmark campaign. He has spoken repeatedly on his support for school health centers and Michigan advocates have developed a positive relationship with his DC staff. His counterpart in the Senate (Health, Education, Labor and Pension) is Senator Ted Kennedy (MA), who has already signed on to the SBHC authorization proposal.

High ranking Democrats in the subcommittees most likely to give an audience to any SBHC legislation are Rep. Edolphus Towns (NY) in the House and Sen. Chris Dodd (CT) in the Senate. Sen. Dodd has agreed to sponsor authorizing legislation in the new Congress and previously sponsored a bill authorizing state-based technical assistance organizations intended to support state SBHC associations. The bill passed in the Senate, but was rejected by the Republican House leaders. Rep. Towns is no stranger to school health centers – and advocates are no stranger to Towns. The New York Coalition of

School-Based Primary Care has had several informational meetings with Towns' office.

Medicaid and SCHIP Policy. Public health insurance (authorized in the Social Security Act) will be under the Congressional watch of the Senate Finance's subcommittee on Health Care, led by Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (WV). Rockefeller's counterpart in the House is Ways and Means Committee chair Charles Rangel (NY). SBHC advocates have been warmly received in both these legislators' offices.

Appropriations. A SBHC program authorization is an important foundation for future policy – especially for establishing a long-term appropriation. Key House Democratic appropriators for health and human services include Rep. Steny Hoyer (MD), current minority whip and possible party leader in the next Congress, who was the chief architect of the federal SBHC earmark, Healthy Schools Healthy Communities – a program dismantled by the Bush administration. Rep. Nita Lowey (NY) is also a well regarded women's and children's advocate. Senators Byrd (WV) and Harkin (IA) will be heading the appropriations committees on the Senate side.

The opportunities for this Democratic Congress to address critical child health, safety, and education issues are numerous. Three major pieces of legislation likely to be on the docket for the 110th Congress are the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), the federal education policy centerpiece, No Child Left Behind, and the community health center program re-authorization. All provide a critical window for raising the visibility and - much more importantly – advancing our goal of a federally sponsored school health center program.

With NASBHC's nearly exclusive focus on Republican targets this past year, our initially successful efforts to secure champions for SBHCs in both parties may serve us well as we look to broaden our centrist coalition of Democrats and Republicans who understand that Americans want their children in schools healthy, safe, and achieving.

There's widespread agreement that the election results require a Congressional shift toward the political center. With our continued advocacy and bi-partisan supporters, we can help this new Congress shift toward another center: *school health center*, that is.

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