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Benefits to Virginia's children lost in debate

By Mary Dunne Stewart
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Richmond-area native Janie Williams graduated in the top 10 percent of her class at the University of Virginia, where she held several campus leadership positions. Despite her credentials and nearly 18 months of searching, Janie can't find a full-time job. Like many in her generation, Janie relies on part-time work, without benefits, until she can find full-time employment.

The one thing Janie — and her parents — don't have to worry about is health insurance.

That's because the Affordable Care Act, the federal health care reform legislation passed one year ago this month, allows children to stay on their parent's insurance until age 26. Until now, most health plans could remove enrolled children when they turned 19.

While vigorous debate continues around the merits of this legislation, we at Voices for Virginia's Children, a nonpartisan child advocacy group, remain focused on how the act affects our state's 2 million children.

Seemingly lost in the debate around the health care reform law are the important provisions designed to keep kids healthy, and the harm that would be caused if some of these provisions are discarded.

Other important provisions that benefit children include those that prohibit insurance companies from:

- Denying coverage to sick children because of pre-existing conditions.
- Limiting how much they spend on most benefits for sick children throughout their lifetimes.
- Canceling your insurance if you or your children get sick just because you made an honest mistake on your coverage application. Before the act, if an insurance company found that you had made a mistake on your insurance application, it might "rescind," or cancel, your benefits.

Several provisions of the act aim to make our communities healthier. For example, many important preventative services, such as screenings and vaccinations, are now covered by new insurance plans and are provided free to patients. The law also provides funding for states to implement evidence-based maternal, infant and early childhood home visiting programs. In fact, the federal government already has made \$1.5 million available in Virginia to support home visiting programs.

More than 5 million children across America are expected to gain health insurance under the current law, according to the Children's Health Fund, an organization focused on bringing health care to underserved children.

Here in Virginia, our 256,000 children living in poverty will clearly benefit from the Affordable Care Act in the short term. But they aren't alone. The sons and daughters of middle-class and affluent families are recognizing benefits as well.

As voices from both sides of the aisle continue the important conversation about health care reform, we respectfully ask Virginians to consider another voice — the one that represents our children.

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