

Parents dismayed with Bush over SCHIP veto

By Madeline Drexler
Special to Sentinel-Voice

BOSTON (NNPA) - Just after Christmas 2006, Dedra Lewis faced a stark choice. Alessiana, Lewis's young daughter, was going blind from a rare eye disorder called uveitis, and losing mobility from juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, part of a devastating syndrome that had suddenly struck the year before.

Together, these conditions required steroid eye drops every hour, other medications throughout the day, and doctors' appointments three times a week.

Lewis, who manages a federally subsidized housing project in Springfield, Mass., had to choose between staying at her full-time job and thereby stinting on Alessiana's care — or cutting back her work hours to care for her daughter, thereby losing her family's health insurance.

"Any mother is going to pick her child," Lewis said.

Two days later, her insurance was cancelled. The costs for Alessiana's medications alone: about \$450 per week. As Lewis recalls, "Everything crashed."

What saved Alessiana, now 9, was the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, which is the same program that Congress has voted to expand, and that the President Bush vetoed last week, fearful that it would usher in government-run health care.

Launched in 1997, the federal-state collaboration was intended to cover children of the "working poor," families whose income was too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to afford private insurance for a group that was disproportionately uninsured.

It succeeded beautifully: Today, SCHIP covers 6.6 million children. From 1997-

2005, SCHIP and Medicaid together contributed to a reduction in the rate of uninsured children by one-third, from 22.3 percent down to 14.9 percent. SCHIP has reduced racial and ethnic disparities in care, because a disproportionate number of enrollees are Black, Hispanic and Native American.

Buoyed by this success, 18 states broadened the program to cover, in some cases, families earning up to 350 percent of the poverty level, a seemingly generous cutoff that still includes the "working poor."

That's because since 1996, the year before SCHIP's creation, the average cost of a premium for a family plan has grown five times as fast as the federal poverty level, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Mirroring this trend, from 1997-2005, the percentage of higher-income uninsured children actually rose, as private, employer-based coverage eroded.

President Bush now wants to rein in this singularly successful government collaboration. In August, during a congressional recess, federal officials slapped onerous new rules on the program. States cannot cover children in families above 250 percent of the federal poverty level, currently set at \$42,929 for a family of three.

Children must be uninsured for a year before they can enroll, to protect private insurers from losing customers. And each state must prove that it has enrolled 95 percent of children below 200 percent of the federal poverty level — a historically unachievable target.

In late September, the Senate and House of Representatives passed bills that raise SCHIP funding by \$35 billion over five years. President Bush promised to veto any legislation that substan-

tially enlarges the program and did, using only the fourth veto of his presidency.

"I believe this is a step toward federalization of health care," he said last month. Now, the Senate, where the SCHIP bill passed by a comfortable margin, and the House will try to override the veto.

Meanwhile, at least eight states will sue the administration over its new guidelines. Though Congress can temporarily resuscitate the program, which officially expired at the end of September, the President's political brinkmanship will ripple across millions of lives.

To understand SCHIP's success, it helps to go beyond political rhetoric and examine it close up, through the eyes of physicians who work with mostly poor and marginalized patients.

One such doctor is Alexy Arauz Boudreau, M.D., instructor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. Among her many SCHIP patients is the daughter of legal immigrants — a mother who toils at a local farm, a father who drives a truck. The daughter was born with gastroschisis, a life-threatening defect in the abdominal wall. With emergency surgery and close monitoring for complications, she survived; without SCHIP-funded care, her complex follow-up treatment would have been spotty, and

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Teen shooter wounds 5, kills self at Ohio campus

Special to Sentinel-Voice

A 14-year-old suspended student killed himself after entering the school, dressed in black, opening fire in his downtown high school Wednesday, wounding four people he shot with one of the two guns he reportedly wielded. Terrified schoolmates hid in closets and bathrooms and took cover under laboratory desks.

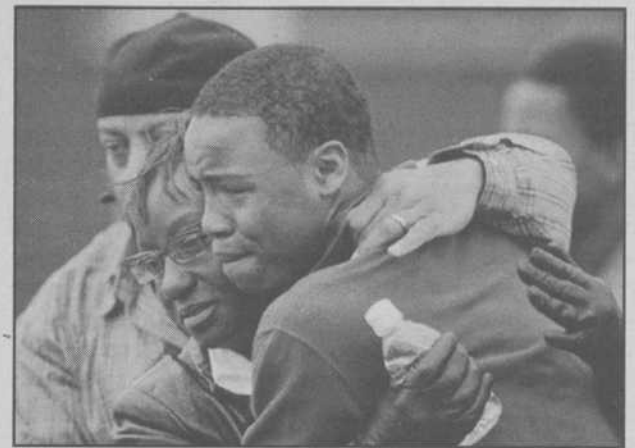
A fellow student at SuccessTech Academy alternative school said Asa H. Coon, who was suspended for fighting two days earlier, had made threats in front of students and teachers last week.

"He's crazy. He threatened to blow up our school. He threatened to stab everybody," Doneisha LeVert said. "We didn't think nothing of it."

Coon was armed with two .38 caliber revolvers, and police found a duffel bag stocked with ammunition and three knives in a bathroom, officials said.

Officials said two teachers and two students were shot, and that a 14-year-old girl fell and hurt her knee while running out of the school.

Witnesses said the shooter moved through the converted five-story downtown office building,



The sad, gruesome aftermath: People embrace outside the SuccessTech Academy after shooting in Cleveland.

working his way up through the first two floors of administrative offices to the third floor of classrooms. Officials said he was wearing a black Marilyn Manson concert shirt, black jeans and black-painted finger nails.

SuccessTech Academy is an alternative high school in the public school district that stresses technology and entrepreneurship.

"It's a shining beacon for the Cleveland Metropolitan School system," said John Zitzner, founder and president of E City Cleveland, a nonprofit group aimed at teaching business skills to inner-city teens. "It's orderly, it's disciplined, it's calm, it's focused."

The school has about 240 black students with a small number of White and Hispanic students.

The school, opened five

years ago. Its graduation rate is 94 percent, well above the district's rate of 55 percent.

Coon had been suspended since Monday for fighting near the school that day, said Charles Blackwell, president of SuccessTech's student-parent organization.

Student Frances Henderson, 14, said she often got into arguments with Coon, who once told her, "I got something for you all." He was a "gothic" who usually wore a trench coat, black boots and a dog collar, she said.

Coon was White and Henderson is Black, but she said she didn't believe race played a role in the shootings.

Schools are closed for now and counseling is available.

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NAACP

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lishing the image and confidence of this great institution within the community. It can be very difficult trying to get attorneys to do pro bono work in the area of civil and equal rights."

Ishman spoke about other goals to boost participation: "We are trying to make a new appeal with an interactive website [not up yet]. This is for people that are computer literate and do not want to travel across town in order to help the organization with some of their goals through volunteerism."

For additional information on the organization or to purchase banquet tickets, contact 275-7375.