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**Viewpoints: The Health Care Debate
Children's Defense Fund General Counsel Susan Gates
Kaiser Family Foundation
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FEMALE SPEAKER: Susan Gates, General Counsel with the Children's Defense Fund, thanks for joining us on health08.org today.

SUSAN GATES: Happy to be here.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Thank you. So when the Children's Defense Fund is looking at health care reform and moving forward with improving our health care system, what is the single most important issue to you all?

SUSAN GATES: That issue is that there are 9.4 million children in America without health insurance, that is 1 in 8 children in the United States. Every 41 seconds a child is born in this country without health insurance, which is about 2100 children every single day and on top of that, is the fact that millions more children are uninsured. They are simply unable to get the medical services that a child critically needs.

And those children are your children that you see everyday. 90-percent are in families with a parent that works, 90-percent are in a home with a parent, and almost 90-percent are children who are citizens of this country. So we have a huge problem that there are 9.4 million children, and in just a 2-year period of time, that number increased by 1 million.

FEMALE SPEAKER: So what is the remedy that Children's Defense Fund proposes in its work?

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SUSAN GATES: The Children's Defense Fund has endorsed the All Healthy Children Act, which is Senate Bill 1564 and House Bill 1688 and it is legislation which would, in fact, ensure that all 9 million children in this country who are uninsured would get the health coverage that they need. It would also ensure that pregnant women in this country get the health coverage that they need because we know that a child's needs begin before they are even born and it is absolutely critical that pregnant women get coverage as well.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And where does that bill stand currently in the House in the Senate?

SUSAN GATES: It was introduced by Senator Sanders in the Senate last year, it was introduced by Congressman Scott from Virginia in the House. I believe it has more co-sponsors than any other Bill of its nature in either the Senate or the House. I believe there are 64 co-sponsors.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And when you are looking to broaden health insurance coverage to children, whether it is legislatively, federally, or whether it is in the states, what are some of the obstacles that you face?

SUSAN GATES: Well the obstacles that we face are getting a political will that is needed to get this done. Whenever there is a great need in this country, there is the ability to get it done and we know how to get health coverage for children. They are the least expensive population to cover

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and they are the population who is most in need. If we do not get them the coverage they need, they do not get treatments, they do not get preventive care, they do not get their hearing checked, their vision checked, they do not get their blood lead levels checked.

So we have to create the political will which we believe actually exists in this country. I think the latest polls show that about 90-percent of Americans believe that children should be covered first, again recognizing the need the children have.

FEMALE SPEAKER: There has been a lot of talk about health care, health insurance, health costs on the campaign trail. Do you feel like this year, this election year and then once we get a new President in 2009, do you think this year will be different than previous years in terms of making meaningful movement towards improving our health care system?

SUSAN GATES: Well certainly the crisis of 47 million people in America in total without health coverage has gotten the issue on the radar screen. But, the problems with our health care system are going to take a long time to fix. I think the Children's Defense Fund is concerned that the debate may go on for quite some time. The problem with that is that children cannot wait while that debate goes on.

The Congress is going to take up this issue in early 2009 about health coverage for children and what the Children's

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Defense Fund is urging is for law makers to come together and show that we can, in fact, provide to a population, coverage for everyone, in this case coverage for all children. Let us show that we can do it correctly, do it right and then we can move on and go ahead and make sure that we have health coverage for everyone, which the Children's Defense Fund certainly supports.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Your focus area is obviously children, which as you mentioned is a cheaper population to insure. What are some of the differences and what are some of the similarities with children and then broadening health insurance to the whole population? Are there some lessons that policy makers can learn from working with children's health insurance?

SUSAN GATES: Well I think that they can learn that when you look at a comprehensive benefit package, that it can be put together in a way that can be given affordably and seamlessly, easily getting rid of the bureaucratic red tape to a population, in this case children. Seniors get Medicare and that has worked for many, many years. We just need to cover children and certainly all Americans need to be covered as well.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Now, are there some differences though as well in terms of looking at coverage for children that maybe necessarily would not apply to broadening it to the broader population?

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SUSAN GATES: I am not sure that we can really seek to looking at all the obstacles that exist in covering everyone. What we have always focused on is how do we come up with a single comprehensive system for children rather than different systems across the states, which is how it currently exists, some children in different programs, some in Medicaid, some in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, others through employer sponsored insurance and how do we start to create a system where every child is getting the exact same benefit so that we stop this inequality and instead create an equal playing field for all children.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Now you talked about the differences in states and you all obviously do a lot of work with the states in addition to working with federal policy makers. What are some of the differences and why is it important to work with both state and the federal policy makers in terms of moving forward with health care coverage?

SUSAN GATES: That is looking at both the good and the bad in the states. There are some states who are doing really well and working really hard. In Minnesota they are doing a good job. We just moved in to support a ballot measure in Montana to cover children. New York is doing extremely well. Other states are not doing so well. Mississippi, way too many uninsured children and in Texas many more.

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Although our CDF Texas office has taken extraordinary steps to get children who had been disenrolled from the state health insurance program back on the roll. So we work with any state to try to help children in that state but what it has very much highlighted for us is the disparities among the state and a need for a federal program to get an equal playing field for all children.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And when you work with states, what are some of the issues for the Children's Defense Fund that are just not negotiable because when there is a lot of people at the table with a lot of different viewpoints on how we can make our system work better, there is a lot of disagreement. So for you all in negotiating, what is just a non-negotiable?

SUSAN GATES: I do not know if I would ever commit anything saying we are non-negotiable on any point but we do believe that we are an independent voice for children and that their lives should not be utilized to gain in other ways and we never compromise on what children actually need to have. And in this case we know that it is a benefit package that gets them everything they need.

We recognize that pregnant women need coverage. There are 750 thousand women in this country every year without health insurance that are getting ready to have children. We want children to be able to move seamlessly into the system, to not be held up with waiting periods. Those are the kinds of

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things that we are always looking for in any type of health package that is being discussed.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And what about what you are willing to negotiate on? And issues that when you work in states, where you have sat down at the table with people and realized that maybe this would be something that you could give in on or that you could see a different point of view and come to some sort of conclusion on?

SUSAN GATES: I do not think that we would ever call it giving in on anything. What we will be supportive of are steps in the right direction. So if a package is going to cover more children, if a package is going to improve the benefits that children are getting, certainly we would be supportive of that. At the same time, however, we would continue to be a voice for what children actually need and hope that we can push law makers toward that end.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Susan Gates, General Counsel with the Children's Defense Fund, thanks for joining us today.

SUSAN GATES: Thank you.

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