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Subcommittee on Human Services

STATE SENATE

January 22, 2007

Chair Greenlick and Members of the Committee:

I am truly honored to be here today.

I take a look at the parents, the nurses, and the many other concerned Oregonians who are sitting behind me – all willing to speak out about the challenge we are facing – and it reminds me of the incredible significance of this legislation.

What we are considering today represents an opportunity to work together, confront the challenge before us, and make sure every child in Oregon has access to affordable health care.

Twenty years ago, I started out as a public health nurse working with at-risk kids. Most of them didn't have health insurance. I saw firsthand how devastating it can be for children when they don't get the care they deserve.

At that time, I never dreamed that I might someday come to the Legislature and be in a position to change public policy to help those children. Yet, today, I have that opportunity, and it is difficult for me to express how fortunate I feel.

No matter how long I serve in the Legislature, and what else I may accomplish, my work on this issue will likely represent the most rewarding chapter in my entire political career.

Healthy Kids isn't just legislation for me, it's the fulfillment of a personal mission that led me to become a nurse in the first place. And I can think of no other issue I would rather spend my time and energy fighting for.

That's what I and others have been doing for the past year and a half, and the legislation you have before you today is the product of that collaborative effort.

Throughout the 2006 interim, the Senate Committee on Children's Health Care worked closely with the Governor, the Medicaid Advisory Committee, and legislators from both parties to develop and refine the Healthy Kids Plan.

We held numerous hearings and considered multiple bill drafts, and ultimately we reached consensus that met our fundamental goal – finding a practical way to guarantee affordable health care for all children in Oregon.

Other witnesses will testify at greater length about all the details in the plan, but I would like to highlight a few key points:



First, the Healthy Kids plan will help thousands of working families who are falling through the cracks in our current health-care system. These families don't make enough money to pay the high price of private insurance for their children, but they make too much to qualify for state and federal health programs.

Working families should be able to pay for their children's medical care without worrying that it will push them to the brink of bankruptcy. The Healthy Kids Plan will help relieve that burden.

Another key component of the plan is it streamlines and simplifies the enrollment process for families. This is essential because half of the uninsured children in Oregon are already eligible for programs, but are not enrolled.

Children should never be denied essential health care because of unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy, and the Healthy Kids Plan directly addresses that problem by knocking down the barriers to coverage and simplifying the process.

Finally, the plan is fiscally responsible. It uses the power of pooling to lower costs, and it maximizes our use of federal matching funds. In fact, for every dollar we invest in the program, we'll get up to \$3.00 back from the federal government.

Of course, while we've done everything we can to make the plan as cost-effective as possible, nothing is ever free, and guaranteeing coverage for 117,000 additional Oregon children won't be free. We'll need to raise our tobacco tax to the same level as Washington State to fully fund the program, but I think you'll agree with me that the investment is worth it to keep our kids healthy and safe. And the truth is, we will save money in the long term if we take care of our children today.

Fortunately, we are joined today by a number of Oregon leaders who are committed to taking care of our children.

One of those individuals is our Governor, who has done more than anyone else to raise the profile of this issue. I am honored and excited that he is joining us this morning, and his presence at this joint hearing sends an unmistakable message that we stand united – the Legislature and the Governor – in our commitment to putting children at the very top of our agenda.

So let me close by quoting the Governor, who likes to say that "an investment in the health of our children is an investment in Oregon's future."

He's right.

Healthy kids are learning kids, and learning kids are the key to a strong economy and a prosperous future.

For the sake of that prosperous future, I urge you to support the Healthy Kids Plan and help us fulfill our moral obligation to take care of all of Oregon's children.

Thank you.