

Immigrant health benefits

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Body

Florida Sen. Bob Graham has the right idea on welfare-reform reauthorization. He plans to offer an amendment in committee today that would give states more flexibility to offer federal **health benefits** to legal **immigrant** pregnant women and children.

His plan makes good sense, in both human and financial terms, and should be supported by his colleagues in the U.S. Senate.

The original welfare-reform law imposed harsh and broad restrictions on federal public assistance for legal **immigrants**. Though Congress has since restored some **benefits**, legal **immigrants** arriving after 1996 remain ineligible for most federal **benefits** - including **health** care for pregnant women and children - during their first five years in this country.

Like many states, Florida has stepped in with substitute **benefits**, including immunizations and regular checkups, for some **immigrant** children. But its \$13.5-million state program is limited, with capped enrollment. While it currently covers 16,000 children, more than 22,000 are on a waiting list, one that is growing by the day.

By relaxing federal restrictions, Graham's amendment would end these waiting lists and give **immigrant** expectant mothers and children the **health** care they need and deserve. With Florida's **immigrant** population on the rise, Graham's office estimates that his amendment would authorize coverage, under the Medicaid and Children's **Health** Insurance Programs, for some 100,000 additional **immigrants** now going without.

Here is one of the biggest of many reasons why that would be money well-spent: Children born here to legal **immigrants** are U.S. citizens, automatically eligible for the **benefits** and social services afforded to every citizen. With prenatal and early **health** care, those children stand a much better chance of growing up to lead healthy and productive lives, with little need for state intervention or support.

Investing a small sum now could pay large dividends later.

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