

Dewhurst drawing flak on CHIP

■ Leaders, clergy say he didn't do business forms, shouldn't criticize those re-enrolling

By GARY SCHARRER
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst drew fire Wednesday from several clergy members and leaders of a community action group who said they have lost patience with him on funding the Children's Health Insurance Program.

It is hypocritical for Dewhurst, they said, to dismiss low-income families' concerns about signing CHIP re-enrollment forms every six months when Dewhurst himself has failed to properly fill out basic business forms affecting some of his business interests.

"We don't have patience with the lieutenant governor who doesn't understand the problems that affect working families of Texas. He says he supports our children, but he hasn't lived up to it," said the Rev. Kevin Collins, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Houston and a leader with

The Metropolitan Organization.

Dewhurst said he has always "been a strong supporter of children," with Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo calling him a "champion for children."

The Network of Texas Industrial Areas Foundation Organizations, which includes the TMO, wants lawmakers to spend the extra \$78 million to return CHIP to 12-month eligibility instead of six months, something the House budget bill already has done. The program's enrollment period shrank four years ago when lawmakers cut the program back as a money-saving measure.

Many families do not re-enroll every six months, which drops children from coverage. Dewhurst has said most Texans don't have much sympathy "for someone that can't fill out a

two-page application every six months."

The Democrat-supported Lone Star Project in Washington reported this week that Dewhurst failed to file necessary forms at least six times in recent years for companies that he owned or controlled.

"It's certainly an important thing for the leader of the Texas Senate to be as punctual as the poor people that he expects to be punctual," Collins said. "And, of course, he's probably got several lawyers who can do this for him whereas the poor people of Texas have to do this all by themselves. It's a shame. He's out of touch."

Meeting later with reporters, Dewhurst said he would not respond "to any political attack in this forum. If folks want to attack me politically, they can

wait until (the election in) 2010."

Dewhurst sent a letter later in the day to the organization criticizing leaders for "politicizing this issue," but inviting them to meet with him "to discuss your concerns and ideas."

He said he's always been interested in providing health insurance to all CHIP children who qualify.

He considers both six- and 12-month enrollment periods artificial time frames.

Some variation of a continuous verification system, which would provide uninterrupted coverage for children in families who qualify, is something Dewhurst and House Speaker Tom Craddick have discussed, Dewhurst said.

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