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Medicaid and CHIP can mean child's life or death By TAMIKA SCOTT

Every day, millions of Texas families rely on CHIP and Medicaid to keep their children healthy. I was one of those families.

It wasn't easy for me to ask for public assistance, but I had to provide health insurance for my children and simply could not afford to pay \$400 a month for private coverage or the high co-pays and deductibles that come with it.

My son, Devante Johnson, began receiving Medicaid at age 9 to cover his maintenance asthma medication and routine checkups. At age 10, Devante was diagnosed with Wilms tumor, an advanced kidney cancer.

Medicaid covered six months of chemotherapy, and at the end of the treatment, the doctors pronounced him cured. He was back to his honors classes and playing outside with his brothers.

But six months later, the cancer returned. Devante's doctors told me that a three-year course of chemotherapy, radiation and constant monitoring were crucial to Devante's recovery.

He needed Medicaid and CHIP more than ever. But Medicaid and CHIP let him down.

Devante began the new treatment, but then his Medicaid came up for renewal. Two months before his coverage was set to expire, I filled out the four-page Medicaid application form and mailed it back in. Only after the application sat in the Medicaid office for six whole weeks was I told that Devante was eligible for CHIP.

Then his application really fell through the cracks. When I contacted CHIP to check the status of the application, I was repeatedly told that they hadn't received it. For months, I re-mailed and re-faxed the application as I watched my son get sicker. It wasn't until my state representative intervened that my application was finally processed.

It took four long months to process the application. But that wasn't the end of it. Even after his application was finally processed, an error forced Devante to wait 90 days for coverage to kick in. Devante's health was deteriorating and he could not afford to wait 90 days.

Yet Medicaid and CHIP managers told me that there was nothing they could do.

While uninsured, Devante had to rely on free samples of experimental drugs the only option for uninsured children with cancer. During this time, Devante lost 20 pounds in two weeks, could barely muster strength to walk, and his tumor became a visibly protruding lump on his back.

On March 1, 2007, Devante died of complications from cancer. He was 14.

I don't want to think my son died in vain.

I urge legislators to reform CHIP and Medicaid so that instead of reapplying every six months, families apply once a year, just as we file taxes once a year. Children should also be able to receive coverage immediately without having to wait 90 days.

The delays and errors in the government's application process and the requirement of reapplying every six months cost me my child's life.

If Devante had 12-month continuous eligibility, he would not have gone four months without coverage and suffered the way he did.

Only parents who have had to watch their kids sit on the sidelines of normal childhood life or see the fear in their child's eyes as he or she is dying can understand my pain.

But I ask all of you to listen to my plea, stand up, and demand full restoration of CHIP and Medicaid with 12 months continuous eligibility.

It is too late for my son, but millions of Texas children will have a chance at a healthy future if we stand up now for children's health care.

Scott is the mother of two children in Houston.

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