

## House set to pass kids' health bill

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WASHINGTON -- The government is poised to extend health coverage to 4 million more lower-income children, a first step in President Barack Obama's promise to shrink the ranks of the uninsured.

The House was expected to approve the expansion of a children's health insurance program Wednesday and deliver it to Obama for his quick signature. The bill passed the Senate last week.

Over the next four years, up to 13 million children could be covered under the program run by the Health and Human Services Department and state governments.

The bill calls for spending an additional \$32.8 billion on the State Children's Health Insurance Program. To cover the increase in spending, lawmakers approved boosting the federal excise tax on a pack of cigarettes by 62 cents, to \$1.01 a pack.

The legislation would allow states to offer a dental benefit through the program for children whose private health insurance does not cover dental care.

More than 7 million children were enrolled in the program at some point in 2008. It was created more than a decade ago to help children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but too low to afford private coverage.

Federal money for the program was set to expire March 31, barring action by Congress.

Opponents of the bill complain that the tobacco tax increase hits the poor the hardest. Many also took exception to expanding the program and Medicaid to children of newly arrived legal immigrants.

Former President George W. Bush twice vetoed a similar spending increase in late 2007. There was little doubt Democrats had the votes to pass the measure once they decided to take it up again. Lawmakers made it a priority in 2009.

"It's going to be a happy day for America," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., anticipating Obama's signing Wednesday.