

# OPINION

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## End Financial Aid Penalty for Marijuana

Law unjust for disadvantaged

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

In 1998, Congress passed the Drug Provision of the Higher Education Act, a law that prevented individuals convicted of drug offenses from receiving federal financial aid for college.

The law extended to those convicted of marijuana-related offenses, no matter how small the amount and didn't make a distinction between those who use drugs and those who sell drugs.

The Act was later amended to extend to students convicted of drug-related offenses, again, no matter how minor, while receiving federal aid. Since the bill passed, thousands of people—most of them black or brown and poor—have been denied the money they need to attend college and change the direction of their future.

It is time this law was amended, making room for minor drug offenders to receive federal financial aid. With America moving away from a blue-collar economy, a college education is becoming increasingly critical.

Denying low-level drug offenders, many of whom would benefit from drug counseling, a chance to advance themselves intellectually and economically will only serve to increase the education and wealth gap in this country.

Drug offenders, before they even decide they want to go college and apply for financial aid, have already paid for their crime: in the courts. They've performed their community service, paid their fines or served out their probations. In many cases

these offenses are misdemeanors. If the courts view these offenses as minor, it stands to reason that the higher education system should as well.

This law disproportionately affects people of color and poor people. Rich kids caught with drugs don't need aid to attend college. Their parents can simply foot the bill. Poor people caught with drugs either have to give up their college dreams altogether or work while attending college, impeding their studies.

People of color, black males in particular, are in small numbers on college campuses around this country.

This law only serves to reduce that population. It also serves to increase the nation's prison population, already the highest in the world. If drug offenders aren't provided with opportunities to obtain the knowledge needed to compete in today's workforce, many will have no choice but to resort to crime, making the streets more dangerous and increasing the burden on taxpayers.

This country has a duty to ensure that anyone who is willing and able to attend college has the opportunity. Financial aid to college students is supposed to be part of our promise to open up doors for those in need. It was not intended to be used as a punishment and shouldn't be used as such.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



## Keeping a Child Healthy Shouldn't be this Hard

Make enrollment automatic

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Children get sick. Parents expect it and hope they never get anything more than a cold, but they want to be prepared for the worst. Part of that preparation is making sure their children have health insurance.

Millions of low- and moderate-income families can't afford private insurance and are eligible for Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). But either they are unaware of this or the application process is so complicated that it takes many months or longer for a child to be covered.

Sadly, long delays in getting health coverage are common. That's why the Children's Defense Fund is seeking this year to blend the two programs and make enrollment automatic.

Unless there's a change, more families will experience the same nightmare as the Uhr family.

Richard Uhr, a retired AT & T employee in Houston, Texas, worked for a full year to get his grandson's SCHIP coverage renewed. Richard's son, Robert Sr., contracted meningitis at six months old and is deaf and cannot speak.

His only means of communication is through a teletype machine or computer, which makes it diffi-



cult to deal with an agency. He worked long enough to qualify for Social Security disability insurance and has a disability pension.

The family learned that Robert Jr., his 11-year-old son, was eligible for half of his father's Social Security benefits and Medicaid health coverage as well. Things went well until a cost-of-living increase put

a copy of the original. That was returned with a request for additional information.

Over the course of a year, Richard received 18 letters requesting different—and often conflicting—missing information on his grandson's application. Names and case numbers were incorrect, records were lost and the family continued to be asked to submit information already had been provided.

None of Richard Uhr's attempts to communicate with SCHIP admin-

istrators yielded satisfactory results. He finally was connected with a supervisor who wasn't able to find the application in the computer system or even find Robert Uhr Jr.'s account number. So Richard was instructed to go back to square one and reapply.

Richard Uhr appealed to the Children's Defense Fund office in Houston for help, and Robert Jr.'s application for health coverage was ultimately renewed.

This is just one example of why the majority of America's nine million uninsured children are eligible but not enrolled in federally supported health insurance programs.

Richard notes that in Texas, when you register your children for school, parents' incomes are provided, and on that basis, eligible students are enrolled in the school lunch program. Inclusion in health care should be that simple.

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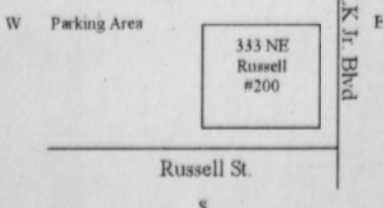
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