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COUNTIES PUSH FOR HEALTHY FAMILIES ENROLLMENT

Parents of uninsured children urged to sign up prior to potential December 18 deadline

LOS ANGELES, Calif. --- Children's coverage advocates issued an urgent call to all families with uninsured children to sign up for the state's Healthy Families Program while they still can. The message comes after the Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board (MRMIB), the agency that administers the Healthy Families Program, announced that they are facing a \$17.2 million program deficit this fiscal year and could freeze all new enrollments in the program beginning December 18, 2008. MRMIB will formally vote on the new enrollment freeze at its December 17 board meeting and, if adopted, the cap would go into effect the following day.

Healthy Families, the state children's health insurance program (SCHIP) in California, currently provides comprehensive health care coverage to over 900,000 children from low- and middle-income families. To be eligible for Healthy Families, a child must:

- Be a California resident that is also a U.S. citizen, U.S. non-citizen national, or eligible qualified immigrant, and
- Come from a family at or below 250% of the poverty level. (For a family of four, this equates to a monthly income of \$4,417 per month or less.)

The warning from MRMIB comes at a time when enrollment in Healthy Families is soaring. According to the agency, more than 27,000 new kids are enrolling each month, the most ever. At that rate, more than 162,000 eligible California children could find themselves on a waiting list and without health care coverage until additional funding is found.

"This could not come at a worse time for California's hard working families who are already struggling to make ends meet in the face of declining employment and increases in housing, food and other basic living expenses," said Bonnie Ferreira, Co-Chair of the California Children's Health Initiatives and Executive Director of Healthy Kids Healthy Future. "A vital door to children's health coverage is closing just when it needs to open wider."

CCHI officials stressed that children eligible for Medi-Cal will still be eligible for coverage. The potential freeze only affects those eligible for Healthy Families.

Parents with uninsured children are encouraged to complete the application process for their children before the enrollment freeze takes effect and can do so by contacting their local Children's Health

Initiative (CHI). Certified Application Assistors (CAA) will help parents determine whether their child qualifies for Healthy Families, or any other available health coverage program, and will assist them in completing the application process in a timely manner. For a county-by-county listing of Children's Health Initiatives, go online to: <http://cchi4kids.org/localchis.php>.

Children's coverage advocates are holding out hope that Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the state Legislature will intervene and take necessary steps to prevent eligible children from being shut out of Healthy Families.

"We know California faces a terrible budget crisis and that difficult choices must be made," said Debra Ward, Project Director for the California Children's Health Initiatives. "But kids should be a priority and failing to cover children of working families will only wind up costing the state more money down the road."

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About the California Children's Health Initiatives (CCHI):

The California Children's Health Initiatives (CCHI) is a collaboration of Children's Health Initiatives (CHIs) in 30 counties dedicated to ensuring that all California children have access to quality health coverage. Together, the CHIs emphasize streamlined enrollment into Healthy Families, Medi-Cal and Healthy Kids insurance programs, and share a goal of creating and maintaining a sustainable health care program for all children in California.