

## Editorial: Cuts in safety net for children go far too deep

Mercury News Editorial

Posted: 07/29/2009

Tuesday marked a new low for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in his role as a guardian of the health of California's children.

With a stroke of his blue pencil, the governor axed an additional \$50 million from the state's Healthy Families program, which provides health insurance to California's neediest children. That's on top of the devastating \$144 million in cuts to Healthy Families in the budget deal Schwarzenegger had negotiated with the Legislature last week.

The result? More than 900,000 children will be added to the rolls of the uninsured in the next year, bringing the total number of uninsured California children to 1.7 million, 80 percent of whom are here legally. The number exceeds the entire population of states such as Nebraska, Idaho and Maine.

The budget cuts forfeit hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funds and in effect eliminate the safety net for California's neediest children. Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg must follow through on his promise Tuesday to challenge Schwarzenegger's legal right to line-item veto items in the budget revision deal, which may be legally distinct from veto rights in an actual budget. And California's safety net leaders must find a way to reduce the impact of the budget cuts.

Two things have to happen for starters. First, the statewide commission charged with offering critical services to California's youngest children, should tap the \$30 million to \$50 million it is believed to have available in reserves to offset a portion of the cuts. And health care plans such as Blue Cross, Kaiser and the Santa Clara Family Health Plan should forgo, at least for a year, the recent rate increases that they were awarded for this program. That could free up another \$20 million. But even these actions will leave hundreds of thousands of children without the basic coverage for annual checkups, which can help prevent devastating chronic diseases and the huge public costs that result from emergency room care when illnesses become acute.

Schwarzenegger came into office promising to make universal coverage for children a priority. Instead, he tried to cap Healthy Families in his first year in Sacramento and opposed Proposition 86 in 2006, which would have insured children through an increase in the tobacco tax. He blew an opportunity to cover every child in California in 2007 when he clung to his doomed proposal for comprehensive health care reform instead of accepting incremental improvement.

The cuts will damage the state's standing with the federal government. California will be in a bad position when it negotiates a new Medicare agreement to determine its share of federal matching dollars: Why should the state be given a break when it has passed up matching funds and generally failed to meet prior obligations to care for the needy?

Of all the failures in this budget agreement, the reversal of California's commitment to care for low-income children is the most stunning. It must not stand.