

Editorial: Health care system puts children at risk

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The next time someone says the United States has the best health care system in the world, remind them of this:

Beginning Oct. 1, every day, on average, another 1,100 low-income children in California — the vast majority of whom are here legally — will no longer have health coverage. All told, an estimated 400,000 children will be added to the list of the uninsured in the next year. That will bring California's total to about 1.2 million, roughly the population of Hawaii.

No regular checkups. No annual trips to the dentist. No easy decision for mom or dad to call the doctor when a high fever hits.

It's a roll of the dice. Parents hope for the best, but we all know what the outcome is likely to be: more suffering and more severe, expensive health problems down the line, ultimately costing more in public dollars and lost productivity in school and work.

And if it weren't for First 5 California, an additional 200,000 children would have been added to the total this year.

First 5 California was established after voters passed Proposition 10 in November 1998, adding a 50 cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs for expectant parents and children up to age 5. Last week it approved contributing \$81.4 million to the Health Families program to cover 200,000 children up to 5 who otherwise would have lost or been denied health care coverage.

It's hard to imagine a more important contribution to children's well-being. But it shouldn't have been necessary. California could have insured every child in the state as part of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's so-called "year of health care" in 2007. The governor and the Legislature blew it. And now the federal government is in danger of dropping the ball.

The United States remains the only industrialized nation in the world without universal health coverage. More than 1 million California kids are among those paying the price.