

Budget deal: 10,000 Sonoma County kids could be denied health coverage

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The state budget awaiting the governor's signature could leave 10,000 or more kids in Sonoma County without medical insurance, county officials said.

Of that number, more than 6,000 local children currently enrolled in the state's low-cost Healthy Families Program could lose their coverage when their annual renewal dates come up. An additional 4,178 children would be denied coverage because of an enrollment freeze issued by the state July 17.

The state budget agreement, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger could sign today, calls for a \$144 million reduction to Healthy Families. That's a little more than one third of the funding for a program that covers 942,000 kids in the state.

Unless the state finds alternative funding sources, the cuts threaten Healthy Families coverage for about 1,000 local children who come up for renewal each month, said Mary Maddux-González, public health officer for the county.

"These are the kids of low income families, and increasingly individuals who are losing their jobs and their health insurance," Maddux-González said.

According to the 100% Campaign, a statewide collaborative of children's advocacy groups that focuses on getting all children in California health coverage, Healthy Families would need to disenroll 450,000 children statewide. The enrollment freeze would bar another 335,000 eligible children.

Maddux-González said there are 12,500 kids currently enrolled in Healthy Families, which is available to families that earn less than 250 percent of poverty, or about \$53,000 a year for a family of four, but do not qualify for Medi-Cal.

"We're talking about up to 10,000 kids losing that coverage in our community," she said. "Without access to health insurance, studies show that families end up having to delay needed care for children. Not only does this hurt children's health it results in higher costs because parents end up seeking episodic care at emergency rooms at much higher costs."

Healthy Kids manager Cliff Coates said children would be removed from program enrollment as they come up for re-enrollment, which happens annually on the date they first enrolled. Enrollment in Healthy Families would be pared back gradually, with children who have been eligible the longest slated to the first cut from the program, he said.

Also, Coates said that in order to achieve budget cuts mandated by the state, the county will be forced to disenroll a disproportionate number of children so there will be enough funding to pay for services delivered to the remaining children.

The federal government, through its Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, pays for 65 percent of the cost of Healthy Families coverage in California, according to Kelly Hardy, associate director for health at Children Now, an advocacy and research group that is part of the 100% Campaign.

"When looking at chronic diseases like obesity, it's important that preventative, early care be available," Hardy said, adding that providing health care to children should be a priority for state lawmakers.

“When a family is looking at their budget, they don’t save money by deciding not to feed their children,” she said.

At Southwest Community Health Center in Santa Rosa, Jessica Monroy, an application assistant, said she enrolls about 20 kids a week into Healthy Families. She said the community clinic stopped processing new applications for Healthy Families after last week’s enrollment freeze was announced.

She said families that fail to re-apply for Healthy Families on or before their annual renewal date will probably be dropped from the program and placed on a waiting list.

Kathie Powell, executive director of the Petaluma Health Center, said dropping kids from Health Families coverage could become “a public health nightmare” when kids are back in school and the regular flu season arrives.

“So then those kids end up being sick and being around kids who have insurance,” Powell said. “The best thing is to make sure everyone has access to health care when they need it.”