

# Viewpoint: Budget crisis puts kids at risk

*Kena Burke*

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California's unprecedented budget crisis poses disaster for our children.

While we recognize that hard choices will be made, instead of protecting those most vulnerable and least able to protect themselves, the governor is proposing to eliminate the only source of health care coverage for almost 1 million children in California at the precise time when it's needed most.

In San Luis Obispo County, 5,347 children are currently enrolled in Healthy Families, a 12 percent increase over last year's enrollment.

Parents whose annual gross income falls under \$45,780 (for a family of three) qualify for this popular program by paying a premium amount from \$4 to \$19 per child per month. The plan works by providing children with affordable access to health care: pediatricians, dentists, eye doctors and even prescription medications.

If Healthy Families were eliminated, these newly uninsured children would be forced to seek care at already overcrowded emergency rooms at a significantly higher cost.

We know that when parents do not have access to health coverage, they delay taking their children for medical attention. Often these children end up in emergency rooms, much sicker and receiving much more costly care.

A recent University of Southern California study of nine counties with local children's health initiatives (CHIs) showed that nearly 1,000 hospitalizations were prevented by providing children with health insurance, saving the state up to \$7 million annually in those counties alone.

In contrast, a 2002 study found that California hospitals incurred nearly \$329 million in uncompensated costs due to uninsured children seeking care. Hospitals end up providing care for the state's uninsured children and youth, with taxpayers supporting well over half of the cost.

Pushing more kids onto the rolls of the uninsured will only add to taxpayer costs. Preventing minor health problems from becoming more serious and costly is a wise and cost-effective means of using taxpayer dollars.

Simple math and common sense tells us that eliminating the Healthy Families program will only cost the state more money, not less. For every dollar the state invests in Healthy Families, the federal government will match with \$2.

The program has enjoyed broad bipartisan support since its enactment more than a decade ago and is a resounding success. That's why Congress and the president voted earlier this year to reauthorize and increase funding for children's coverage.

Given this infusion of available federal money, states like Alabama are now expanding their children's coverage programs.

Yet, here in California, the governor wants to move us in the exact opposite direction and close down our program, resulting in the state losing out on up to \$1.5 billion of federal money in the next year alone.

There are better ways to dig California out of its current budget mess. Californians consistently and overwhelmingly support providing coverage for children.

The special election results sent a clear message to our elected officials in Sacramento that we expect them to do the job they were elected to do and protect our most vulnerable populations.

Even during hard economic times, budgets are still about priorities. Until health coverage is both available and affordable to the children of working families, we can think of no higher priority than to protect the well-being of all our children.

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