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Cástulo de la Rocha: Cutting kids health program is ill-advised

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Linda, a single mother of three, lost her job and her health insurance. She found herself in a dilemma all parents fear. Diagnosed with asthma, Linda's youngest daughter, Amanda, was forced to seek treatment and much-needed medication at an emergency room after suffering an attack.

Thankfully, an emergency room physician recommended that Linda consider seeking treatment at a neighborhood community clinic. Now, Linda's daughter has a local doctor and a regimen that keeps her asthma in check.

Sadly, the day many Californians have long dreaded may soon be at hand. Faced with a multibillion-dollar deficit, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has recommended eliminating dozens of state programs, including Healthy Families, arguably one of the most successful health care programs California administers. Healthy Families covers 900,000 children statewide.

It is unfortunate that the most vulnerable group – children – is among the first to feel the pain of budget shortfalls. Equally ironic, while President Barack Obama works overtime to enact major health care reform, California is taking a giant step backward.

If these cuts are indeed made, California would have the distinction of being the only state in the country without a children's health care program.

While cutting Healthy Families saves about \$365 million, the calculation ignores the more than \$712 million in federal funds the state would throw away. Washington contributes \$2 for every \$1 the state puts up. Tossing aside almost three-quarters of a billion dollars a year in matching federal funds makes little fiscal sense, even amid the financial train wreck that confronts lawmakers.

True, California needs to tighten its belt. However, it is foolhardy to eliminate programs that will only drive up health care costs as a result of increased emergency room visits and cost the state tremendous funding from the federal government.

Our children are not the only ones at risk, though. Adult day health care, or ADHC, a groundbreaking and vital program for thousands of frail senior citizens, is also slated for extinction. For the paltry savings generated, the return on investment is immeasurable. Seniors receive preventive, mental health, case management and other important health services through the ADHC program. This type of program means the difference between growing old with dignity and simply being tossed aside.

Elimination of both the Healthy Families and senior programs will result in increased long-term and short-term costs rather than saving money. In the case of senior coverage, roughly a third of the nearly 40,000 seniors who are helped statewide by this program will end up at a skilled nursing facility within a few months.

Eliminating Healthy Families will force thousands of children to receive their care at an emergency room instead of a community health clinic, again costing the state far more than any savings realized through outright elimination.

There are no easy solutions, but some are better than others. For instance, the governor and Legislature should put a premium on programs that earn the state federal matching funds or the stimulus funding California is slated to receive. Looking to community health clinics instead of emergency rooms as a source of health care delivery is a vital and important first step. A recent study concluded that California wastes more than \$2 billion each year because patients seek treatment at an emergency room rather than receiving similar care at a clinic.

The governor should redouble his efforts to seek additional funding from Washington. As a "donor state," we send Washington more money in taxes than we receive back in services. The bill is long overdue. It is time that California demand more financial support than it has previously.

That makes good fiscal and practical sense at a terribly difficult time. It is also a strategy Californians can get behind. Walking away from hundreds of millions of dollars and leaving our most vulnerable at risk makes no sense. Now is not the time to be penny-wise and pound-foolish.