

Healthy Families puts new applicants on waiting list

By Steve Wiegand

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A state-sponsored program that provides low-cost health insurance to needy families stopped accepting new clients Friday as a result of California's ongoing budget mess.

For the first time since its inception in 1997, Healthy Families began turning away Californians who make too much to qualify for Medi-Cal, but not enough to pay for private health insurance.

"This is a huge loss for families," said Jennifer Kwan, a program manager at Cover the Kids, a Sacramento agency that contracts with the state program. "They're not going to be able to get the services they need."

State health care officials decided to begin putting new applicants on a waiting list, in anticipation of a cut of as much as \$90 million in state aid when a budget-balancing plan is finally agreed to by legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Program officials said that as many as 400,000 children might be turned away in the next year unless the money is restored. Kwan said an estimated 8,000 of those kids are in Sacramento County.

Supporters of the program are hopeful that at least some of the lost funding can be replaced by the First 5 California Commission. The commission, which is financed by a 50-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes, supports health and education programs for children.

In the meantime, parents like Pa Lor will have to wait for coverage.

Lor, a 26-year-old Del Paso Heights woman, put her 4-year-old daughter Percaeus' name on the Healthy Families waiting list Friday.

Lor said that while she and her husband both work, he has no employer-sponsored health insurance, and hers covers only herself.

"It's very scary because I don't know what to do, if I can get her a checkup," Lor said. "It's rather frightening."