

## **BOB CUDDY: Society has a responsibility to Healthy Families, healthy kids**

Monday, Dec. 15, 2008

The line of individuals hurting because the clowns in Sacramento refuse to act like adults and adopt a budget stretches around the block. You might not be able to see some of them, because they are too short.

Children, for example. The kids in the Healthy Families program, to be more specific.

Healthy Families helps provide medical, dental and vision care to children who slip through the cracks. It makes sure they have someplace to get help if they break an arm, run a high fever or come screaming into the living room because their ear is killing them.



*Pearl Wishon, 3, watches as her twin brother, Emory, is examined by Dr. Sasha Syztel during a wellness checkup. Syztel works at Dr. René Bravo's office in San Luis Obispo and treats children in the Healthy Families program.*

The program is designed for youngsters between birth and 18 whose families are at 250 percent or less of the federal poverty level and do not have employer-sponsored health insurance. We are talking about working families, for the most part.

Here in San Luis Obispo County, 5,100 children are in the Healthy Families program, according to Dr. Penny Borenstein, the county's health director. The county enrolls an additional 155 youngsters monthly.

At least it does for now.

On Wednesday, the state Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board might change all that.

The board, whose cumbersome title has been shortened to Mr. Mib by those who deal with it, might put a cap on the number of kids allowed in the Healthy Families program.

If the number of kids who qualify exceeds the cap, the board might simply create a waiting list. And those children would go untreated.

Why is Mr. Mib being so cruel to children?

It's not his fault. Mr. Mib is a conduit for money from the state and the feds. Because the state budget is whirling aimlessly around in a vortex of hot air created by legislators, Mr. Mib is signaling that it might just have to throw a few kids under the bus.

"I'm very concerned that we're going in the wrong direction," Borenstein said.

Healthy Families is important not only for the kids receiving treatment, but for new youngsters who join daily, according to Kena Burke, executive director of the Children's Health Initiative.

Burke said hard times have put more kids in danger of having no health insurance. She says the number of children being served statewide by Healthy Families is now 900,000 and growing.

Burke, Borenstein and others are asking Mr. Mib to delay action until next year.

Burke is hoping that after President-elect Barack Obama is sworn in, the federal and state governments might be able to work together to craft a solution

To Burke and Borenstein, keeping the program alive is a no-brainer.

In addition to treating existing health problems, Borenstein said, "you need to lay down a foundation for good health early on." If youngsters don't learn healthy behavior, they are more likely to become unhealthy adults, she said.

In addition, children who receive health care, preventive or otherwise, perform better in school, Burke said. "They're not sick, they don't have ear problems, they don't have dental problems. They've had a good night's sleep."

"The families are strengthened," Burke said. They don't have to worry about whether they can afford to send the child to the doctor.

I'm with these two hard-working community leaders. The only thing I marvel at is how polite they both are when they talk about the ongoing war against the powerless.

With children going to school sick, kids whose teeth are rotting in their heads and youngsters who can't see properly, my only question is, what 's wrong with us? If we can't help our children, then who indeed are we as a society?