

County a leader in kids with health insurance

- SENTINEL STAFF REPORT

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Santa Cruz County has 98 percent of children 18 and younger covered by health insurance, the second highest rate in California.

"We have exceeded our goals," said Susan True, executive director of First 5 Santa Cruz County, which launched a drive four years ago to ensure every child younger than 5 has health care coverage.

About 93 percent of the county's children had coverage in 2001, according to a state survey.

Nearly 10,000 children are newly enrolled in health care insurance coverage. New programs such as Healthy Kids worked with Medi-Cal and Healthy Families to help families with limited incomes.

"Health is a cornerstone of children's later success, so health care is a top priority," True said.

First 5 Santa Cruz County is its final year of a three-year strategic plan to improve children's lives.

Steps are being taken in two other key areas: Improving literacy and helping families at risk of abuse or neglect.

Only 34 percent of third-graders read at grade level, according to 2007 standardized STAR test scores. Almost every subsidized child-care provider now incorporates teaching techniques to build vocabulary and instill a love of reading, thanks to pre-literacy training provided by First 5 Santa Cruz County.

To counter child abuse rates are higher than the state average, First 5 Santa Cruz County and other children's advocates began an early intervention program in 2006 for families at risk. A team of social workers, counselors, public health workers and family resource center representatives provide home visits, parenting skills, medical care and referrals to drug and alcohol recovery programs.

First 5 Santa Cruz County invests about \$3 million annually from the 50-cent per pack tobacco tax in early childhood programs, supplemented by \$2 million from community partners.

"There is so much that can be done for children and their families and the needs can seem overwhelming," said Toni Campbell who chairs the First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission. "But thanks to early investments of both time and money, we're seeing significant positive changes."