

Jim Bennett and Christina Cuevas: Healthcare choices parents shouldn't have to make

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The reauthorization of the federal state Children's Health Insurance Program CHIP, known in California as Healthy Families, was a victory for millions of kids across the nation currently insured in the program, including more than 6,000 here in Santa Cruz County, as well as many more eligible for enrollment. It represents a giant step forward for the health of California's children.

However, we now face the prospect of two giant steps backward given California's budget crisis and some shortsighted proposals by our state Legislature. In order to receive the \$1.5 billion in federal matching dollars allotted this year for California's Healthy Families program, the state needs to invest \$130 million of its own funds to expand the Healthy Families program. If they fail to do so, California's money could be left on the table or go to another state altogether. Allowing that to happen would be a colossal mistake that would move us in the exact opposite direction of our goal of providing health coverage to every child in California.

On top of that, our Legislature just passed a budget that sweeps the reserves of the First 5 California Commission and cuts in half funding for the state commission and all county commissions, including First 5 Santa Cruz County. This reduction will be on the ballot in May when voters will be asked to redirect \$1.2 billion in First 5 funds -- currently dedicated to early childhood health and early learning -- to state general fund expenses.

Gov. Schwarzenegger has said that diverting First 5 funds and making additional cuts will help fund "high priority state programs that would otherwise require general fund support." But we're left to ask, what greater priority is there than ensuring the health of California's kids?

Our local First 5, in partnership with Healthy Kids Santa Cruz, has helped provide comprehensive health insurance to over 3,000 kids from birth to age 5 since 2004. First 5 has funded premiums as well as successful outreach and enrollment strategies. As a result, First 5 has ensured that our youngest children have access to essential health services, such as developmental screenings and oral health care. Defunding these local commissions would threaten our children's access to vital care, putting their long-term health at serious risk.

Providing all California kids with access to affordable, quality health care is an attainable goal. Local Healthy Kids programs throughout California, including here in Santa Cruz, have shown the way.

Cumulatively, they have enrolled hundreds of thousands of children into Healthy Kids, Healthy Families, and Medi-Cal -- over 12,000 children in Santa Cruz County alone.

Healthy Kids of Santa Cruz County has increased access to preventive care for young children by 18 percent over the past two years, putting us above the 90th percentile when compared to Medicaid programs nationally. And a recent University of Southern California study showed that our program, along with eight other Healthy Kids counties, reduced preventable hospitalizations by 25 percent, saving the state over \$7 million in one year.

Without a statewide solution and mechanism in place to fund health insurance for all California kids, the progress we've made at the local level will unravel. With nearly 800,000 uninsured children in California, and that number increasing as families lose health benefits due to rising unemployment, our kids cannot wait.

Recently, a local mother told us that without Medi-Cal, her 2-year old daughter would have died. "No parent should have to go through that," she said. "No parent should have to choose between their child's health and their child's health care bills."

It's imperative that the California Legislature listen to the parents and families it serves. It must capitalize on the advancements made possible by First 5, CHIP and Healthy Kids toward expanding children's health coverage. Because no parent should have to choose.

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