

Healthy Families program begins dropping kids

More than 300 kids in Calistoga will be disenrolled

By John Waters Jr.
Editor
Thursday, August 27, 2009

A little more than 300 children of low-income families will be dropped from enrollment in the state's Healthy Families program in the face of ongoing budget challenges.

The California Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board, which manages the Healthy Families program, voted last week to begin eliminating coverage for about 60,000 children statewide beginning Oct. 1.

Families will begin receiving letters announcing the disenrollment next week.

The cuts are expected to continue despite an Aug. 13 decision from First 5 California Commission to supplement the Healthy Families budget for a short time, enough to cover about 200,000 children statewide, up to age 5, through next June.

The program currently insures about 1.1 million low-income children who do not qualify for Medi-Cal, and if additional funding streams are not established, the cuts could result in the elimination of close to 670,000 patients by next summer.

The First 5 California Commission, which administers the proceeds of a state tobacco tax increase for early childhood health and education programs, had pledged some \$81.4 million to prop up the Healthy Families program. But postponing disenrollment even one month would cost the Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board \$92 million.

Last month, the state Legislature passed a budget revision package that cut \$128.6 million from Healthy Families in addition to \$50 million cut by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger through line-item vetoes.

In late July Children's Health Initiative of Napa County CEO Mark Diel, who oversees the Healthy Families program throughout the county, announced severe cutbacks would occur, but not the end of the program itself.

"These are not programs that serve people on welfare, but hardworking families who cannot afford to buy health insurance through employer-sponsored programs," Diel said.

About 310 Calistoga families are currently enrolled in the Healthy Families program, and about 12,300 children in the Napa Valley, from Calistoga to American Canyon, are now at risk.

About 98 percent of the funds that support health programs for the poor working families come from outside the Napa Valley, Diel said.

"The funds come from state and federal programs and some from private donations," he said. "Ironically, cutting these programs will mean more poor working families will not have access to preventive care, dental or vision care and will use emergency room services for their primary care needs, which will greatly increase the cost of their care ultimately shouldered by the state."