



OLDER CYCLISTS TAKE NEW CHALLENGE

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STATE BUDGET CRISIS

Dental advocates: Funding cut would be painful

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WATSONVILLE — Maria Montesinos, Yaritma Alvarado and Ricardo Madrigal Moreno are among the more than 3,000 people in Santa Cruz who would be cut off from seeing a dentist if the state eliminates their dental benefits to close a \$24 billion budget gap.

All three rely on dental coverage through Medi-Cal, which provides health services to low-income adults.

Montesino, 48, is a full-time mom of three while her husband works at the Santa Cruz flea market. They would go without dental care if not for the dentists at the Dientes clinic who see Medi-Cal patients.

Alvarado, 27, a mother of two, works as a scheduling coordinator at the Dientes clinic. She depends

on the state's Healthy Families program for dental care for her children because she cannot afford out-of-pocket expenses.

Moreno, 63, came to the United States as a teen and worked in agriculture and construction until he was hit by a truck. The accident left him in a wheelchair. A diabetic, he has relied on Salud Para la Gente since 2001 for dental work ranging from cleanings and fillings to partial dentures, root canals and crowns.

Advocates gathered Thursday at the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust to point out the economic and human impacts of cutting off adult dental care benefits to save \$109 million annually.

"I strongly encourage the Legislature to reconsider cuts to adult dental health services for low-income people and the Healthy Families program," said Will Hahn, executive director of Dientes.

"The amount of savings in dollars is minimal. The amount of suffering for children, the elderly disabled and working poor will be enormous."

Together, Dientes and Salud would lose about \$2 million in Medi-Cal reimbursements, said Salud spokeswoman Sara Clarénbach.

Advocates cited a new study by researchers Dana Hughes and Joel Diringer for the Oral Health Access Council detailing the consequences of the state pulling the plug on dental care for people can't otherwise afford it.

California would lose \$134.5 million in federal matching funds, they projected, triggering a loss statewide of 4,240 jobs, \$205.5 million in wages and \$516 million in economic activity.

Santa Cruz County, which



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Dentist Dr. Laura Diaz, right, is assisted by Maria Diaz as she cares for patient Alfonso Saucedo at the Beach Flats Health Center in Santa Cruz on Thursday.

SEE CUTS ON B14

CUTS

Continued from B1

has about 66 people staffing low-income dental clinics, could lose 25 jobs, \$1.2 million in wages and \$3 million in economic activity, the researchers said.

Their analysis is based on economic multipliers from the U.S. Department of Commerce estimating every \$1 million in dental offices supports 19.4 jobs

and every \$1 change in dental offices affects \$2.86 in economic activity.

While Medi-Cal patients represent only a portion of those treated by Salud and Dientes, dentists say the loss of funding would have wide ramifications.

"The resulting loss of Medi-Cal dollars will mean our clinics will not be able to sustain their dental programs," said Dr. Dennis Daluyut of Salud.

Services would have to be reduced, he said.

SALUD BY THE NUMBERS

EMPLOYEES IN DENTAL CARE: 33
ADULT MEDI-CAL PATIENTS IN 2008: 1,381
OFFICE VISITS IN 2008: 4,697

DIENTES BY THE NUMBERS

EMPLOYEES IN DENTAL CARE: 33
ADULT MEDI-CAL PATIENTS IN 2008: 1,693
OFFICE VISITS IN 2008: More than 6,050. Many patients require multiple visits after putting off care.

SOURCE: Salud Para la Gente