
Advocates fear kids will lose health insurance

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Advocates worry that state budget cutbacks will jeopardize health coverage for 80,000 children in California, including more than 1,500 in Santa Cruz County, next year.

SANTA CRUZ "In hard economic times, when families need support and services most, we're seeing cutbacks and rollbacks," said Leslie Conner, who oversees Santa Cruz Healthy Kids, a low-cost health insurance program for children. "We're committed to sustaining the program as long as we can."

About 98 percent of children in Santa Cruz County have health insurance. The state's financial difficulties could hurt

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LESLIE CONNER, SANTA CRUZ HEALTHY KIDS

local efforts, Conner said, noting Healthy Families, a statewide insurance program, is facing a \$17 million deficit this year.

That could result in a freeze on enrollment, the first in the program's 10-year history. Such a freeze could put an estimated 1,000 Santa Cruz County children on a wait list for coverage.

"Note that the freeze comes at a time of unprecedented enrollment levels across the state: 27,000 eligible children are applying each month," Conner

said.

The state plans to require families on Medi-Cal to re-register every six months, which Conner said "will no doubt knock families off its rolls." Some 1,500 children in Santa Cruz County could lose coverage as a result.

In addition, Healthy Families will charge families a higher premium to shore up its finances.

"We expect additional families to drop off because they can't afford the increase," Conner said.

She welcomed an announcement from The California Endowment Tuesday granting \$425,000 to Santa Cruz Healthy Kids. The award was part of a \$7.75 million granted statewide to support local initiatives serving uninsured children.

A UC study this year found Healthy Kids saved the state \$7.3 million a year by preventing more than 1,000 unnecessary hospitalizations, and another study found participating children missed school less frequently and did better academically.

"We cannot allow these programs to simply die on the vine due to state inaction," said Robert Phillips of The California Endowment.

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