

Loss of Medi-Cal 'optional benefits' will be devastating

SARA CLARENBACH, WILL HAHN

The recent passage of California's budget resulted in the loss of Medi-Cal "optional benefits," a cut designed to reduce California's budget deficit. "Optional benefits" include adult dental benefits, optometry, opticians and optical labs, audiology, podiatry, speech therapy, psychology services, chiropractic care, acupuncture and incontinence creams and washes. A significant loss is dental coverage for adult Medi-Cal beneficiaries, effective July 1, 2009.

In Santa Cruz County the major providers of Medi-Cal dental services are Salud Para La Gente and Dientes Community Dental Care. Salud provides comprehensive primary care, including dental, dental, optometric and elder day care to the uninsured and underserved populations. Dientes focuses exclusively on high quality dental care for the uninsured and publicly insured, with services that include endodontics and pediatric dentistry. Together, Dientes and Salud had over 41,700 dental patient encounters in 2008.

The Health Improvement Partnership, a local countywide collaborative of leading public and private health care organizations and providers, joins with Dientes and Salud

in opposing cuts to Medi-Cal dental benefits. HIP members recognize that dental disease is linked to higher risk for pre-term births, heart disease, stroke and diabetes and as such, dental care cannot be considered optional.

Without Medi-Cal reimbursement, Dientes and Salud will be unable to provide dental care to some of the most vulnerable Californians, who have nowhere to turn without Medi-Cal. The loss of Medi-Cal optional benefits will likely impact more than 20,000 adults in Santa Cruz County.

Salud and Dientes are collaborating to inform the community about this issue and to request that community members contact their legislators and the Governor to urge restoration of Medi-Cal optional benefits. Dientes and Salud will also be announcing a press conference in May to further raise awareness about the health issues at stake.

Unless Medi-Cal adult dental benefits are restored, patients will not receive needed care from their dentists and oral health conditions will deteriorate. Patients will seek treatment for relief of infection and pain in hospital emergency rooms, which do not have the capacity to provide dental care, and costs will rise. Provider organizations will lay off dentists, dental assistants, office and

support staff. The ripple effect of losing these "optional" benefits will be widespread, long-lasting and devastating.

Community health centers are exploring legislative, legal and administrative methods to reinstate optional benefits, and the California Dental Association has been meeting with legislators to emphasize the importance of dental benefits.

Amid skyrocketing unemployment and financially-strapped families, this is not the time to dismantle vital health services. The elimination of Medi-Cal dental coverage impacts the elderly, the disabled, low income workers and unemployed families — all of whom are anxious about where to receive care.

Join us in contacting the Governor and legislators to tell them that dental benefits should not be considered optional.

■ Gov. Schwarzenegger, (916)-445-2841

■ Senators Joe Simitian, (831) 425-0401, and Abel Maldonado, (831) 657-6315

■ Assembly Members Bill Monning, (831) 425-1503, and Anna Caballero, (831) 759-8676

For more information, contact Will Hahn, executive director of Dientes, at 464-5420, or Sara Clarenbach, Salud director of Advocacy and Community Engagement, at 728-8250.