

Thousands of county children could lose medical benefits

An estimated 2.8 million low-income California adults will lose medical and dental benefits in July after drastic budget cuts were made by state lawmakers, according to a group of Santa Cruz County medical providers who gathered Thursday at the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust office in Watsonville.

As part of an attempt to close a \$24.3 billion budget deficit, both houses of the California Legislature in February agreed on an emergency spending bill that, among other things, slashed Medi-Cal benefits. The cuts included optometry, psychiatry, podiatry and dental services, among a host of other services deemed “optional.”

Additionally, state lawmakers are calling for the elimination or reduction of the Healthy Families Program, which provides health, dental and vision insurance plans for children whose families do not qualify for no-cost Medi-Cal.

Thursday’s conference focused chiefly on dental services, which PVCHT chief executive Kathleen King described as a “cornerstone” initiative.

“We now face a very grim obstacle,” she said.

In Santa Cruz County, about 6,300 children could lose their medical benefits if the Healthy Families Program is eliminated. An additional 20,000 children in Monterey County could also lose benefits.

Officials say it’s more likely that the eligibility requirements for the program will be reduced, which will lead to 1,500 children in Santa Cruz County and 4,900 in Monterey County losing their medical coverage, according to Dr. Alana Thompson, a dentist for Dientes Community Dental Care.

“We feel that taking basic services from families who need them most makes no sense,” said Leslie Connor, program and policy director of the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County, which works to connect low-income families with medical coverage.

Medical providers say the cuts, while expected to save the state some revenue, will in fact lead to a greater loss. While the cuts would save the state \$109.3 million, they would also equate to a loss of \$134.5 million in matching federal funds for clinics throughout the state.

“It is very difficult to understand how our legislators and the governor have eliminated benefits which most people would not consider optional,” said Sara Clarenbach, a spokeswoman for Salud Para La Gente. “It makes no sense to forgo huge amounts of matching funds.”

Because affected people won’t have access to routine dental care, minor dental issues could eventually become serious, and many families will instead seek treatment in emergency rooms, where personnel are often not equipped to handle dental emergencies. This will in turn lead to longer wait times in ERs and insurance rate increases. Similar cuts in Maryland led to a 21 percent increase in ER visits in just one year, Thompson said.

Thompson said that Dientes and Salud Para La Gente would still be able to provide basic emergency services, which fall far short of what the medical care that is needed. Both clinics could lose \$2 million in state and federal reimbursements because of the cuts.

Thompson, along with other county health services officials, discussed a link between oral health and physical health. She pointed to studies showing that dental problems are a leading cause of absences in schools and work.

The California Primary Care Association, which represents more than 600 nonprofit health care clinics, filed a lawsuit on April 29 seeking to prohibit the state from eliminating or reducing the programs, which are considered to be “core services” by state and federal agencies, said Salud Para La Gente dental director Dr. Dennis Balyut.

Yari Alvarado, who works at Dientes and also depends on the organization to provide medical and dental care for her children, said that the cuts will mean she can take her kids to the doctor only when they’re sick. Vaccines and regular checkups, she said, will be out of reach.

“I, financially, don’t imagine myself being able to provide private insurance,” she said. “As a mother, it makes me very sad.”

Ricardo Moreno, 63, was injured in an accident in 1993, and has since used a wheelchair. He was diagnosed with diabetes in 1997, and relies on his Medi-Cal benefits for his health and dental care.

“If Medi-Cal benefits are canceled, it will be a disaster for me,” he said through a Spanish translator. “I don’t have the money to pay for a private dentist.”