

Proposed state cuts threaten the poor

FRESNO -- The cuts proposed in Gov. Jerry Brown's 2012-2013 budget would be devastating to lower-income residents and communities of color, health advocates said last week.

In order to close a \$9.2 billion budget deficit, Brown has proposed \$10.3 billion in cuts and revenues. The majority of the \$4.2 billion in cuts in Brown's proposed budget are to health and human services, according to Health Access, a health care consumer advocacy coalition.

Another \$5.4 billion in cuts to education and public safety would also be triggered, if voters do not approve in November an initiative to raise revenues through taxes.

"We can't cut anymore," said Ellen Wu, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. "We need the revenue to provide these basic services to people who just need that extra help to get by."

The reductions come as the sour economy has forced more state residents to rely on the state's safety-net programs, which have already been eroded through previous years' budgets cuts.

"You cut away the fat, and eventually you are going to hit the meat," said Chad Silva, policy director for the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California. "We've been hitting the meat."

The proposed budget includes a \$946.2 million reduction to the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids program (CalWORKS,) the state's main welfare program.

Proposed cuts to CalWORKS include the elimination of about 61,000 child care slots for families that have transitioned from welfare to work.

The budget also proposed reducing the child-only benefits -- from \$463 a month to \$391 a month - for kids whose parents are ineligible to work in the country.

"CalWORKS families are already the poorest in our state," said Jessica Bartholow, legislative advocate for the Western Center on Law & Poverty.

The cuts, she said, make families more vulnerable to homelessness, hunger and deeper poverty.

The state, she said, should be striving to "find opportunities to improve the economic self-sufficiency of these families, rather than making them more vulnerable."

Assemblymember Henry T. Perea is concerned the proposed CalWORKS cuts would hit single mothers especially hard.

"If the cuts proposed in the governor's budget go through, we will be essentially pulling the rug out from under working mothers who are trying to create a better life for themselves and their children," Perea said in an e-mail.

"If our goal is to get more mothers working and off of welfare, then access to child care programs is absolutely vital."

Among other provisions, the budget would reduce the managed care rates by more than 25 percent in the Healthy Families Program, which provides health benefits for children who are not eligible for Medi-Cal.

It would also shift the payment methodology for federally qualified health centers and rural health centers funded under Medi-Cal.

If voters do not approve the governor's tax initiative in November, public education funds will also be chopped, including \$200 million cuts to both the University of California and California State University systems. That would result in either higher fees for students, or cuts to classes offered.

"Cuts to education also present a real hardship to Latino families," said Silva of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California.

The cuts mean, he said, "less money going into public schools, where a lot of us are going, and represents a possible decline in access to quality education."

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