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Health center leaders lament possible loss of state support for dental care



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Officials with Golden Valley Health Centers on Thursday urged state leaders to reverse plans to end adult dental care under Medi-Cal next month.

"This fight will be a major struggle," Central Valley Health Network communications manager Hilda Martinez told a crowd of about 30. "It's important that we not balance the budget on the backs of the poor."

The Legislature in February decided to cut the benefit to adults, saving \$115 million each year.

Denti-Cal covers about 3 million adults who are poor, elderly or disabled.

Children will still be treated.

Leaders with the health center argued that the added costs exceed the immediate savings.

The state will lose \$134 million in federal matching funds for the program. Another 4,240 people will lose jobs, amounting to \$240.5 million in lost wages. Business activity will decrease by \$516.1 million, according to the study "Eliminating Medi-Cal Adult Dental: Cost and Consequences."

Published this month, it was written by Dana Hughes, a doctor in public health at UC San Francisco, and Joel Diringer, with Diringer and Associates.

Besides the media campaign, the California Primary Care Association filed a lawsuit against the state.

A hearing is scheduled for today.

Center CEO Mike Sullivan said cuts in dental care will send more people to the emergency room because they'll ignore problems until they're too painful. Those costs will be passed on to the state, he said.

He said he believes voters' rejection of the propositions in the special election was in response to Sacramento's gimmicks, not a mandate to cut health care programs.

The center will try to offset the lost adult visits by increasing the number of children treated, he said, conceding it's a difficult task. Last year, Golden Valley treated about 3,000 people between Merced and Stanislaus counties. No staff have been slated to be cut at this point.

Besides trying to resurrect Denti-Cal, Sullivan warned about the possible elimination of California Healthy Families Program, a farmworkers health program and a program that helps the uninsured.

He encouraged the crowd to pressure Assemblywoman Cathleen Galgiani, D-Stockton, and state Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Merced, to restore the benefits.

Denham in a statement said, "One of the reasons I voted against the Feb. 19 state budget is because it made major short-term cuts without public input and without looking at long-term savings."

Robin Adam, Galgiani's spokesman, said that she cares about health care and is faced with difficult choices. "I know Cathleen would like to see it restored," Adam said. "How to accomplish that is the challenge."

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