

## **Adult dental cuts to Medi-Cal coverage could have dire consequences, providers say**

**By LORA HINES**  
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San Bernardino County health care providers and advocates on Thursday rallied residents to urge lawmakers to spare state-funded medical and dental services that will be eliminated beginning July 1.

A little more than \$109 million in adult Medi-Cal dental benefits will end June 30 if lawmakers don't come up with a plan to save them, according to a UC San Francisco report issued this month. In February, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreed to eliminate some adult Medi-Cal services, identified as optional benefits, to balance the state budget. The adult dental program makes up about 3 percent of the state's total \$36.6 billion Medi-Cal budget.

Medi-Cal is California's Medicaid program that covers health care for the poor. The adult dental program covers diagnostic and preventive services, fillings, tooth extractions and root canals.

On Thursday, officials at San Bernardino's Inland Family Community Health Center, a nonprofit health and dental clinic, said more than 163,000 adult Medi-Cal patients in San Bernardino County will lose their dental coverage because of budget cuts.

An estimated 149,000 Riverside County patients also could be affected, according to Medi-Cal figures from the California HealthCare Foundation, a nonprofit health care research and policy organization.

Dr. Temetry Lindsey, Inland Family Community Health Center's president and CEO, said eliminating Medi-Cal's adult dental services will cost the state money in the long run. People without coverage will go without dental care until a problem becomes so severe that they go to a hospital emergency department, she said. Her clinic's dental office provides about 3,000 adult Medi-Cal dental appointments annually.

The California HealthCare Foundation last month released a report showing that hospital emergency departments statewide see about 80,000 patients a year who do not receive preventive dental care, which leads to untreated cavities, dental abscesses and periodontal disease.

"The governor has increasingly put more pressure on health services," Lindsey said. "He is willing to put more people at risk."

Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Lisa Page said the governor had few options, considering the state's economic crisis.

"These are cuts that the governor would never have even considered except in this worst-case scenario, but this is our worst-case scenario," she said.

Today, a Sacramento County Superior Court judge is expected to hear arguments in a lawsuit filed in April to stop the state from implementing July 1 cuts to some Medi-Cal benefits, including adult dental services.

"Those people who need us are not going to have access to us," said Dr. John Anderson, dental director at Inland Family Community Health Center. "Some dentists will have to close their doors because the amount of Denti-Cal they receive is significant."

He said he expects elimination of the adult program will affect participation in the children's Medi-Cal dental program, even though it still will be funded. Dentists could drop out of Medi-Cal, which would make it difficult for Medi-Cal patients to find dentists to treat their children, Anderson said.

Lindsey said Medi-Cal dental cuts could lead to the loss of nearly 220 jobs and \$10.5 million in lost wages in San Bernardino County.

Diane Woods, president and CEO of San Bernardino's African American Health Institute, said people don't understand the void that will be created when Medi-Cal's adult dental program is eliminated.

"When this goes away, there is nothing to replace it," said Woods, whose nonprofit organization studies health disparities in San Bernardino. "We need to understand the crisis we are in."

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