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State dithers while Californians suffer

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Budget

Last week President Barack Obama called for a new era of responsibility. He noted that our success in meeting the crises that we all face depends on a return to our values of "honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism."

And while we couldn't agree more with the president, apparently lawmakers in Sacramento either weren't listening or don't think the president's words apply to them.

In California, as elsewhere, we are facing an enormous economic crisis.

And on Feb. 1, that crisis reached its boiling point, as the state runs out of cash and many begin going without pay.

State Controller John Chiang made that official earlier this week when he announced California's cash shortage would force him to delay some \$3.7 billion in scheduled payments for at least 30 days.

Once again, Sacramento politicians will be making hardworking Californians pay the price for their inability to act and solve California's budget crisis.

As of Super Bowl Sunday, taxpayers who file early, many of whom desperately need the help in these tough economic times, won't be seeing their refunds; college students, who already battle rising tuition, increased textbook costs, and higher costs of housing, won't be getting their grants and financial aid; California's Regional 4 centers, who care for our state's poor and developmentally disabled community, won't be receiving their program checks; and community health centers, such as Family HealthCare Network, which every day sees more uninsured come through their doors, will not be receiving the very funding that the state dedicates for uninsured healthcare: Expanded Access to Primary Care, Seasonal/Agricultural/Migratory Workers, and Rural Health Services Development Clinic programs.

At this point, these organizations are pleased that payments from California's Medi-Cal program are not being affected, at least for the next 30 days that is.

However, we are sadly disappointed to see that once again the burden of our state's fiscal irresponsibility is resting squarely on the shoulders of the state's most vulnerable populations and those that serve them.

Moreover, the sacrifices being asked of us come at a time when public programs and services are all that stand between complete destitution and survival for many of our state's residents.

And what's worse? It is only January, and there appears to be no solution, no end to the sacrifices in sight. Indeed, if this impasse stretches into March, which is likely, Controller Chiang will be forced to delay another, even larger batch of payments. Medi-Cal delays are not far off.

As the Big Five continues its series of closed-door meetings in an attempt to broker a deal to wipe

away the state's current and projected \$40 billion shortfall, we encourage them to heed the words of our new president, who has called in a new era of "courage," "fair play" and "responsibility."

We ask our leaders to show the due recognition of the crisis that is now before our state, and the same courage that ordinary Californians are demonstrating every day as they struggle with the worst economy since The Great Depression.

- Harry Foster is president and CEO of Family Health Care Network, which operates clinics throughout Tulare County.
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