

Schwarzenegger's 'year of health care' has been major disappointment

By Bill Minkel

Article Launched: 10/29/2007 01:33:32 AM PDT

Health care for California's children is not heroic. It is not excessive or extravagant. It is human.

My congregation - along with 350 others in California, representing 450,000 California families - has worked tirelessly over the past several years to ensure that all our children have access to health care services they need in order to grow up healthy and become productive members of our society.

The first months of 2007 became an exciting and promising time for advocates of children's health in California. Our governor and legislative leaders promised *this* would be the year of health care reform, the year in which all children and uninsured Californians would receive health coverage.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata all introduced separate and ambitious plans, traveled throughout the state promoting these proposals, and held lengthy discussions in the Legislature. But that was then, and this is now.

Almost a month after the end of the legislative session, and the beginning of a special session, failed negotiations have left children as empty-handed as in the beginning. Making matters worse, this year's budget crisis and delay brought about a compromised budget that cut \$67 million in funds for children's health programs. The funding was crucial to conduct outreach to families with uninsured children and to simplify the enrollment process. These funds would have helped 100,000 children get health insurance.

Now, the sweeping changes proposed in the health care reform proposals by the governor and the legislative leaders may not materialize for many months - maybe even years. Recent negotiations have shifted toward separating the policy portion of a health care reform proposal from the funding, further delaying our goal to cover all children this year. In a best-case scenario, voters will decide on the financing portion of a health care reform plan in the November 2008 election, with elements of the plan not due to take effect until 2010. By then, another 55,000 of our children will need health coverage.

We are calling on our leaders to demonstrate their moral fiber by doing the right thing and ensuring coverage for all children in California. Comprehensive health care reform efforts should not compromise the health of our children. They cannot, and should not, be made to wait any longer to have adequate access to health care.

In California, approximately 800,000 children lack health insurance. That means thousands and thousands of our kids cannot see a doctor when they get sick, or visit the dentist to keep up with their oral health. If they do, their parents are forced to pay out-of-pocket, which can lead, in many cases, to bankruptcy. This is unacceptable for the wealthiest state in the wealthiest country in the world.

Our elected officials made a commitment to our children, and they must keep their word. They need to enact legislation that will secure funding for children's health care coverage starting in 2008, while a broader health care reform proposal is enacted. This interim funding will ensure that no child goes without crucial medical care.

If our leaders fail to act on behalf of our children, thousands of them could start losing coverage by the end of this year. The health of our kids is neither a political issue nor a partisan issue. It is a moral issue that demands our attention. We stand together and united in our resolve to care for the children in our communities who are being left behind by the current system.

BILL MINKEL is an associate pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in San Jose and a leader with People Acting In Community Together. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.