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Viewpoints: Welfare cuts threaten growth of jobs

By Cathi Grams

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger says his New Year's resolution for California comes down to three words: "Jobs, jobs, jobs."

In doing so, he tacitly acknowledges the recession's brutal impact on California's families and children. And yet continued deep budget cuts – with the governor threatening more of the same for next year – are making the recession's impacts much worse, shredding California's safety net and eliminating services that Californians desperately need to get back to work.

Making the "jobs, jobs, jobs" goal a reality will require holding the line against further cuts that will plunge many more children and families into poverty and despair. Studies show that job prospects and well-being for families falling into poverty are damaged for decades. Boosting the employment potential of the state's families displaced by the recession requires the state to fund a credible welfare-to-work system.

Sadly, dramatic reductions in state support for vulnerable families will leave an imprint on California's economy and the well-being of our children long after this recession is over.

A recent study by the family research group First Focus found that children who fall into poverty during economic recessions face far greater hurdles obtaining jobs as adults, earn less when they do work, and are at far greater risk of adulthood poverty compared to those who escaped poverty. Yet rather than working to halt this destructive cycle of poverty, state lawmakers and the governor have presided over years of consecutive state budget cuts that have put children at risk and made escaping poverty for California's disadvantaged children an even steeper climb:

- The governor's 2009 veto of \$120 million to services for abused and neglected children dealt another severe blow to a child protective services system that has been severely and chronically underfunded for years. By eliminating funding for approximately 400 child protective workers who help vulnerable children get out and stay out of harm's way, these cuts put abused and neglected children at far greater risk of continued victimization.

- State reductions will also eliminate services to thousands of families to prevent children from being removed from their homes and to reunite families. In Sacramento County alone, almost 1,300 families were cut from family maintenance services in 2009, which will result in more children placed in foster care. The county has also been forced to eliminate

medical exams and some face-to-face visits with foster children. Compounding the impact of these cuts, the state has cut transitional support that enables foster children to find employment and housing, rather than a future on the streets or in jails as they reach age 18 and age out of the foster care.

- The Legislature and governor slashed \$750 million over two years to CalWORKS, the state's highly successful welfare-to-work program. Those cuts eliminated child care and job training that would help thousands of unemployed people get back to work and improve their children's chances of escaping poverty. These cuts clearly work at cross-purposes with the governor's priority to create jobs; a recent study by Beacon Economics shows for every dollar invested in moving families from welfare to work, the economy experiences a return of at least \$1.30 and significant employment growth.

Even as families grapple with the devastating economic impact of previous cuts, investments in services that could create jobs and save long-term costs continue to be in the governor's cross hairs. The governor's recent threat to eliminate In-Home Supportive Services would eliminate 350,000 jobs for working Californians. On top of this, if the state doesn't replace one-time federal support that prevented cuts to CalWORKS proposed by the governor last summer, tens of thousands more children could be forced into deep poverty.

Because childhood poverty can spell reduced opportunity for a lifetime, these destructive cuts are particularly concerning as the recession forces once middle-class families into dire situations.

Increasingly, human services agency waiting rooms are crowded with working people, such as small contractors. Some of these have been hit hard by gyrating gas prices and the construction slowdown. Thus, they've been forced to access county services and food closets for the first time.

California needs to increase its commitment to creating "jobs, jobs, jobs," but cuts to the safety net risk consigning tens of thousands of people to worse jobs, less economic productivity, and generations of poverty. If the governor is to make good on his resolution, he and the Legislature must hold the line on further cuts to the safety net and properly fund the services that protect families and children.

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