

Legislature needs to restore child protection funds

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The California budget situation will result in painful cuts to many important programs. Those cuts must be made strategically to minimize long-term damage to our state. In spite of Gov. Schwarzenegger's long-stated commitment to protecting California's most vulnerable populations from budget cuts, last year he inexplicably vetoed \$80 million in funds that had been approved by the Legislature for Child Protective Services. The health and safety of abused and neglected children is now further jeopardized by the governor's proposal to continue this devastating cut in the next state budget.

The governor's action caused the state to lose \$53 million in federal funding to protect kids. That's a total loss of \$133 million for children who are already dealing with loss on so many levels.

These cuts have been layered on top of years of under-funding and increasing caseloads. Sonoma County has met this challenge of doing more with less but local services have still suffered. We are struggling to respond quickly enough to reports of abuse and neglect and we are providing less help to foster youth who need services as they transition to adulthood.

Sonoma County's Child Protective Services fields an average of 1,053 calls a month. The Sonoma County Human Services Department's Family, Youth and Children's Division not only deals with adoptions, emergency response and family reunification, but is also ultimately responsible for an average of 500 kids a month who are no longer in their own homes.

A team of hard-working, dedicated social workers and agencies work together to ensure that families are strengthened and when families fail, to ensure that no child falls between the cracks. It is a huge responsibility and one that our social workers take on daily, in spite of higher caseloads and fewer resources.

Needs don't go away just because the funding disappears. In fact, when funding disappears in lean times, the need for services increases. Without adequate funding, kids in crisis have few options. More foster youth will leave the system without the support they need to become productive adults, resulting in homelessness, contact with law enforcement and the justice system and steep costs in other public benefit programs. According to Prevent Child Abuse America, failing to address child abuse costs taxpayers an estimated \$104 billion annually in the form of greater demand for services.

This cut is a bad investment. It reduces our commitment to children who are the future of California.

We all share in the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of abused and neglected children, and Sonoma County won't abandon our most vulnerable children. We need the governor and Legislature to make the same commitment.

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