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California lawmakers need to restore child welfare funding

By Joe Valentine

WHEN I stand before a meeting of our Board of Supervisors, it's my job to assure them and the people of Contra Costa County that we are doing everything humanly possible to keep kids safe and help families overcome challenges that too often lead to children being removed from their homes. Our future generation deserves a safe home to grow up in and a fair shot at a bright future.

So when decisions made in Sacramento force our county to cut back on child welfare services, it's also my job to let our community know that we need to fight for the funding that is essential to protecting our children and investing in our future. We must hold Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger accountable for going back on the commitment he made to California's most vulnerable children.

Unconscionable cuts that harm children who have already suffered from abuse and neglect are putting our children at greater risk, thanks to the governor's decision to veto \$80 million in funding for child welfare services. The governor's action caused the state to lose another \$53 million in federal funding to protect kids. That's a \$133 million loss for children who are already dealing with loss on so many levels.

Across California, funding was eliminated for more than 529 child welfare workers.

Here in Contra Costa County, state reductions have resulted in 119 reduced staff. As a result, we have been unable to adequately staff child-abuse hot lines, investigate allegations of child abuse, assist families to safely prevent the removal of children, and work with families to safely reunify children or find permanent, loving homes for those who cannot be reunified.

Contra Costa County foster youth, who are transitioning to self-sufficiency without the normal support systems most of us have, are not receiving necessary housing and education assistance. Before the reductions, our county was able to assist these foster youth with housing deposits and to pay for additional education needs, such as tuition and books. Without stable housing, the youth find it difficult to focus on the steps of education or vocation that will allow them to become self-sufficient in the future.

As a result, children in Contra Costa County are staying in foster care longer because staff are unable to provide the needed supports which would allow families to reunify sooner or get children placed in permanent homes. This delay has resulted in increased financial costs to Contra Costa County and additional emotional stress to these children.

The governor is again proposing these cuts, and our community will continue to pay

the price for his decision. The erosion of this safety net will continue, and we will have even fewer social workers to help families mend their homes and find children permanent, loving homes.

Children will continue to remain in limbo, staying in the foster care system longer. Families won't receive counseling and therapy to enable kids to safely return home.

Foster families won't receive assistance to provide basic care, such as beds and clothing, to foster youth. And we may see the elimination of transitional services that help foster kids find jobs and housing when they "age out" of the system upon turning 18 as mentioned above.

Pulling the plug on services children and families need doesn't mean their needs will go away. Those needs simply get pushed to a later date and come at a higher cost. Abused and neglected children who do not receive help often become adults who struggle with alcoholism, depression and disease, including obesity, cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Failing to address child abuse early on costs taxpayers an estimated \$104 billion annually in the form of greater demand for services, according to Prevent Child Abuse America.

California can and must do better for its abused and neglected children. Not only because it's the right thing to do but also because caring for them means investing in the safety and security of our communities.

We all share in the responsibility to ensure the well-being of abused and neglected

children, and our county won't abandon our most vulnerable children. We need the governor and Legislature to make the same commitment.

Joe Valentine is director of Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services.