

# **Bakersfield Californian**

## **Gift: Children's health care**

### **COMMUNITY VOICES**

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Children throughout California are busy making their holiday wish lists. Teddy bears and dolls are sure to rank high. However, there's another gift that, if delivered by our elected officials in Sacramento, will endure for decades to come: health care coverage for all children. A new study confirms that access to health care coverage is truly the gift that keeps on giving.

The study, which evaluated Children's Health Initiatives in Los Angeles, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, concludes that health insurance improves the overall health and well-being of children and their families. The study focused on children enrolled for at least a year in Healthy Kids, a locally-funded children's health insurance program found in 25 of the 58 counties in California, including Kern County.

Across the board health gains were shown, including a dramatic increase in the proportion of children having a usual source of care -- reaching about 90 percent in all three counties.

Additionally, there was a significant increase in medical visits in all three counties, including preventive check-ups, sick visits and specialist visits.

The study also found that the proportion of Healthy Kids parents who reported being "very confident" that their children could obtain needed medical care rose sharply in all three counties. In Los Angeles County alone, parent confidence nearly doubled, rising from 28 percent to 55 percent. These are working parents who simply want what we all want: access to the health care our children need, when they need it.

Children with health insurance are more likely to receive essential preventive care and less likely to let common illnesses go untreated. Ultimately, this will result in less costly health problems down the line for children, their parents, their doctors, taxpayers, schools and consumers. The vast majority of the children studied had no health insurance coverage prior to enrolling in Healthy Kids.

In Kern County, First 5 supports the Healthy Kids Kern County program, which operates on a model similar to the initiatives in Santa Clara, San Mateo and Los Angeles. Since 2005, more than 1,800 previously uninsured kids have been provided with medical, dental and vision coverage through our Healthy Kids program. These are kids who would otherwise lack access to state-funded programs, such as Medi-Cal and Healthy Families, due to income level or immigration status.

Despite our success, the Children's Health Initiative of Kern County, as well as all the initiatives across the state, have reached a critical juncture. Due to funding limitations, we've been forced to cap enrollment into our programs.

Without interim funding and sound policy that includes coverage for all kids, our current Healthy Kids enrollees are at risk of losing their health insurance. In fact, as many as 40 percent of the 85,000 California children covered through Healthy Kids could lose coverage in 2008.

As the findings of this study reaffirm, these initiatives have shown the way to statewide coverage for all children in California. Dropping children from their health coverage would be a monumental step backward in the progress we've made.

It's critical that our elected officials in California seize the opportunity they have and provide coverage and funding for all California kids in 2008. Doing so would bring good health and a brighter new year to thousands of California families this holiday season.

***Wendy Wayne is executive director of First 5 Kern. Community Voices is an expanded commentary that may contain up to 500 words. The Californian reserves the right to reprint commentaries in all formats, including on its Web page.***