



### My Word: Debra Ward

By Debra Ward  
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WITH THE RECENT announcement that the Alameda Alliance for Health will soon close its locally funded Healthy Kids program, we are now witnessing a tip-of-the-iceberg moment in children's health coverage.

More than 1,000 Alameda County children will soon lose their health insurance, and the vast majority of them will have no other source of coverage. Most of these children will be forced to rely on emergency-room care for conditions that could otherwise be treated by a regular doctor, further straining our county and state health care system.

To be sure, this was an act of last resort and the Alliance did everything possible to prevent this from happening. Funding for its Healthy Kids program — and for most of the programs like them in 30 counties statewide was never intended to be long-term.

Instead, these programs were largely created as a bridge to long-term health care coverage to be financed and structured with help from the state.

Children's Health Initiatives (CHIs) in 30 California counties have worked over the past seven years to cumulatively enroll more than 150,000 kids into local Healthy Kids health insurance programs, and hundreds of thousands more children into public programs like Medi-Cal and Healthy Families.

Children who otherwise would lack access to basic health care now receive routine, preventive exams

and necessary immunizations.

It's working. Multiple studies show that children insured through Healthy Kids miss fewer school days, receive more timely treatment for illnesses and injuries and overall, are healthier, more productive kids.

Yet all of our progress is in serious jeopardy of unraveling. In addition to the closure of Alameda County's program, more than 4,000 children enrolled in Healthy Kids programs already have lost coverage since July due to funding shortfalls, and up to 60,000 children ages 6 to 18 in other counties in California could lose coverage this year, if additional funding is not found.

Most CHIs have been forced to impose waiting lists currently totaling 21,000 kids because of insufficient funding.

Despite valiant efforts by some in the state capitol, our state leaders have failed to deliver on their commitment to children. To make matters worse, the proposed budget cuts being considered will have a devastating impact on kids.

We understand that hard choices must be made in difficult budget times, but budgets are a reflection of our state's priorities and we can think of no greater priority than to protect children, especially those most vulnerable.

Cutting reimbursement rates for Medi-Cal providers and plans, subjecting low-income families to red tape through semi-annual status reports, cutting access to vital medical services including dental care, and increasing premiums and co-pays for Healthy Families will put up to 350,000 children and families at risk while ultimately increasing our state's health care costs.

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That's why it's so important to stop these harmful budget cuts. Once the budget is resolved, our state leaders need to find a way to keep California's children a priority.

They can do so by making sure that any renewed health reform effort includes health care coverage expansion for kids. Simply put, the CHI movement cannot sustain itself long-term without a permanent source of funding and help from the state.

Even those CHIs not on the brink of disenrollment face unstable long-term futures due to the lack of statewide solution.

The CHIs have done their part by serving as models of success and demonstrating that covering all kids can be done at the local level. Now it's time for Sacramento to do their part and finish the job or else we will soon hit an iceberg, causing untold harm to California's kids and our state's future.

**Debra Ward serves as project director for the California Children's Health Initiatives.**

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