

OPINION

Spare Family Health Care From Cuts

As the tax-cutting initiative process has been clear about "no new taxes," it's time to be specific about what we, the taxpayers, do and don't want to pay for.

Last year, Washington voters overwhelmingly supported an initiative to increase the Basic Health Program. We, the taxpayers, sent a message loud and clear that affordable health care is a top priority for Washingtonians.

Yet in both the Senate and House budgets, health and human services are cut disproportionately to other programs in our state. Yakima County is even more dramatically impacted by these cuts due to our high percentage of low-income, working families and their doctors who rely on this support.

Health care has reached a crisis situation for Yakima County residents, providers and insurance companies. The increasing costs of insurance to individuals and employers, the increase in physicians' operating costs, the growing numbers of low-income working families, and the growing numbers of uninsured families have created the "perfect storm" for health care collapse in our Valley and in our state.

Both the Senate and House budgets impose premiums for children on Medicaid — anywhere from \$10 to \$25 per child per month. Experience in other states has shown in excess of 40 percent of the children will lose Medicaid coverage when premiums are imposed due to families' inability to pay them. Our own experience in Yakima County just a year ago proved this true. Of the 4,710 children terminated from Medicaid last October, only 2,400 have continued health coverage through the Basic Health Plan (50 percent lost coverage).

Adding insult to injury, our state will spend nearly \$4 million in administrative costs to bill, and collect, these premiums. In Yakima County, this same \$4 million would serve 3,000 low-



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income children for a full year. Where are our priorities?

In the past 13 years, Washington state mothers have borne healthier babies, and reduced the state and federal costs of these births, as a direct result of the efforts of the 1989 First Steps legislation. Studies have shown not only a reduction in low-birth-weight children, but better learning abilities of these children when they reach school (as indicated by the fourth-grade WASL test scores). The current Senate proposal eliminates this program. In Yakima County, 1,200 low-income women giving birth to new

United States citizens will lose coverage for prenatal services.

Currently, more than 27,000 people in Yakima County have no health insurance. Between the faltering economy and the Senate's proposed budget cuts to health care, an additional 7,000 county residents are likely to be without any kind of health insurance in 2004. More than half of these will be children. An increase of this magnitude will ripple throughout the health system and have a devastating impact on the health of both our residents and our economy.

Medical expenses are the No. 1 reason in our country for personal bankruptcies. Families exhaust themselves financially trying to pay for health bills or delay care until they are seriously ill with problems that could have been avoided. They will eventually turn up in hospital emergency rooms, sicker, and with no way to pay for their care. We all pay the bill because the

costs of uncompensated care must be offset by higher premiums for the privately insured. Higher premiums eventually price even moderate-income families out of the market, starting a vicious cycle of rate inflation and insurance loss.

So this session, as legislators scramble to balance anti-tax sentiment with the pain budget cuts will cause Washington families, they should not overlook the tax increase we have already approved. The voters resoundingly supported expanded access to affordable health insurance and offered up a revenue source. Now it's time for our representatives to deliver on their end of the bargain.

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