

Santa Cruz Sentinel

January 30, 2011

COUNTY

Senator seeks to help uninsured children

State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, has introduced a bill to help counties that provide children's health insurance tap additional federal funds at no cost to the state.

Senate Bill 36 would enable County Health Initiatives in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties and in San Francisco to cover more uninsured children by changing income-based eligibility limits in state law from 300 percent to 400 percent of the federal poverty level. Simitian hopes increased access to federal funds will produce similar initiatives in other counties.

The bill also would allow counties to protect children currently receiving care under the state's Healthy Families Program if the state's budget situation results in program cutbacks.

"First and foremost, I want insurance coverage for these kids," said Simitian, "but I'm also trying to ensure that California has access to its fair share of federal funds."

Simitian introduced a similar bill that passed the Legislature in 2010 but was vetoed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

For information on SB 36, visit www.senatorsimitian.com/legislation.

San Mateo County Times



January 26, 2011

Let's ensure California kids get a healthy start in life

By Joe Simitian

Every child should have health insurance. It's fundamentally the right thing to do, of course, but given the importance of good health to a strong start in life, it's also the smart thing to do. That's why San Mateo County established its Healthy Kids program in 2003.

Federal and state programs insure the most impoverished families. But too many children from families with modest incomes — not needy enough for public assistance, but not able to afford insurance

— have no health coverage. These children often don't see a doctor until they are quite sick. They are not getting regular dental checkups. Healthy Kids is for them.

But Healthy Kids itself is in need of a booster shot. I have introduced Senate Bill 36 to ensure that it stays healthy as the recession and California's budget crisis leave more children without health insurance. It's a painless shot. It's not a dose of state money, just words — the words to rewrite the state law.

In 2009, the federal government raised its eligibility ceiling for children's health coverage to 400 percent of the national poverty level. Here in expensive San Mateo County, 400 percent of the national poverty level is considered the minimum necessary for self-sufficiency.

Current California law, however, does not allow counties to insure children in families whose income exceeds 300 percent of the federal poverty level, even if a county wants to use its own funds to do so. With the federal government offering \$2 for every \$1 that the county provides, California has been surrendering money to other states. And California kids are being denied health care coverage. Senate Bill 36 fixes both those problems.

In just five years, San Mateo County reduced the number of uninsured children from 17,000 to 2,000 by encouraging families who qualified for federal and state programs to enroll their children, and using local funds, by offering Healthy Kids coverage to families that made slightly more than those

programs allow.

Senate Bill 36 would update the law to allow Healthy Kids to come to the rescue of children who might be denied coverage under California's more restrictive program. It would enable Healthy Kids to capture matching funds approved by the federal government. And it would empower Healthy Kids to bridge the gap between what the state is providing and what the federal government is willing to match.

Healthy Kids programs in San Mateo and other counties have been a bargain. Health insurance for children is relatively inexpensive. If a doctor sees children regularly, which is much more likely to happen if they have insurance, potentially expensive conditions are avoided. The children will be

healthier and happier. Healthy children miss fewer days of school, which improves their chances of doing well.

San Mateo County knows from experience that lower-income families in affluent counties can be slighted by state funding formulas. Legislation I authored in 2003 has enabled hundreds of additional families to receive child care that otherwise would have been cut off, based on San Mateo's high overall income levels.

The same principle applies to Healthy Kids. This should be the easiest "yes" vote this year for the Legislature. California shouldn't be deprived of its fair share of federal funds, and California kids shouldn't be deprived of a healthy start in life.

JOE SIMITIAN, D-Palo Alto, represents the 11th state Senate District, which includes parts of San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. He wrote this article for this newspaper.