



## Uninsured ranks may rise by 20,200 in 2010

By Tom Kisken  
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Ventura County's uninsured population could grow by more than 20,200 people in 2010 because of proposed state healthcare policy changes designed to help offset California's \$17.2 billion budget deficit, according to a report to be released today.

About 17,000 county residents could lose or be blocked from coverage in 2010 because of proposals to limit the Medi-Cal eligibility of the working poor and to make parents and children prove they qualify for the insurance program every three months, says the study by Health Access California. The Sacramento advocacy group is fighting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed Medi-Cal cuts of more than \$1 billion.

The study says it will take to 2010 to see the full effect of the proposed policy changes if they make it into the final budget. It predicted about 3,191 county residents could be without coverage because of the governor's proposals to delay the streamlining of enrollment for state insurance programs and also increase premiums for the California Healthy Families low-cost program.

Across the state, there would be about 1 million more uninsured people in 2010 if the proposals are passed, said the report's co-author, Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access. He called the proposals the largest rollback of insurance coverage in the state's history.

"The cuts are not one-time budget cuts. These are permanent changes," he said, suggesting the proposals push the state away from universal health insurance. "It's not reform. It's health deform in the direction it goes."

Nearly 7 million Californians are uninsured. About 104,000 Ventura County residents — about 13 percent of the population — were uninsured in 2005, according to the California Health Interview Survey at UCLA.

### Officials say data inflated

State officials said the report's estimate of 1 million more uninsured Californians in 2010 is inflated and challenged other aspects, too. They note the governor's proposal to change eligibility so a family of four that makes more than \$12,932 a year would not be able to join Medi-Cal has already been rejected by the Senate and the Assembly along with many other healthcare cuts and likely won't be in the final budget.

They also challenge the report's premise that the proposed budget cuts and policy changes are permanent, saying the money could come back if the budget crisis improves.

"It's impossible to predict three years down the road what will happen," said Norman Williams, a deputy director of the California Department of Health Care Services.

The report's estimates of effects in California counties come from state and county data as well as analysis from an independent group called the California Budget Project. Ventura County officials said they couldn't respond to the exact projections but said the cuts would be felt if passed.

"It could have a significant impact on access," said Mike Powers, executive director of the Ventura County Health Care Agency. "It's another barrier to routine preventive care, which they need to keep well and keep out of the emergency rooms and hospitals."

Not everyone is opposed

But the specter of 20,000 more uninsured Ventura County residents isn't hard to imagine at all, said Maricela Morales, associate executive director of the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy in Ventura. She focused on the proposal to require families to prove Medi-Cal eligibility every three months instead of every six months for parents and every year for children.

"It's an indirect way of eliminating the eligibility of those programs without saying, You're no longer eligible," she said. "It's taking the approach of saying, OK, we're going to make it harder for you."

Not everyone is opposed to cutting Medi-Cal.

"I don't see that it's the government's role to provide insurance for people any more than it's their responsibility to provide them with a house," said Jere Robings, a taxpayer advocate from Thousand Oaks. "People need housing. People need cars to get work. Where do you draw the line of what the government is going to provide?"

Wright said the report was aimed at showing the proposed cuts will have a much more severe impact than reported. He said he was bothered by Schwarzenegger's recent comments about the need for healthcare reform.

"I think it's outrageous that he's calling the number of uninsured in California a moral crisis while proposing a budget that only increases the number of uninsured in California," Wright said.



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